PERKINS LIBRARY

Duke University

Rare Books

NEW NOVELS

NARCISSUS
By Viola Meynell

THE IRON AGE
By F. Brett Young

MAKING MONEY
By Owen Johnson

THE KING'S MEN
By John Palmer

L. S. D.
By Bohun Lynch

CASUALS OF THE SEA
By William McFee

THE TRUE DIMENSION
By Warrington Dawson

THE CREATED LEGEND
By Feodor Sologub

MARTIN SECKER
MCMXVI

MELEAGER

A FANTASY

BY H. M. VAUGHAN
F. S. A.

" Will thou know how farre the
Starres work upon us ?"

ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY
(Part I., sect. ii., sub-sect. iv.)

LONDON
MARTIN SECKER
NUMBER FIVE JOHN STREET
ADELPHI

First Published 1916

UTOPIA
RBR
V366M

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PROLOGUE	7
PART ONE	15
PART TWO	199
EPIGRAPH	308

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
Duke University Libraries

http://www.archive.org/details/meleagerfantasy00vaug

PROLOGUE

(*By the Editor of the Original MS., the late* EDWARD CAYLEY, F.S.A.)

IN giving the following narrative to the Press, I feel, as its editor, I am bound to write a short preface of apology or explanation to such of the public as care to read these pages. But I shall be as brief as possible.

The manuscript, which is here produced in printed form, came into my personal possession through the kindness of Sir W—— Y——, the eminent traveller and mountaineer, who chanced upon it under the following circumstances. Whilst engaged in some work of exploration in the Andes, at the height of 12,000 feet or thereabouts above sea-level, he and his party had to traverse a dry stony ravine. On their passage upward one of the attendant guides chanced to espy amongst the loose stones and rubble a plain white metal cylinder sealed at both ends. Except for a conspicuous dent, evidently the result of a heavy fall, the cylinder itself appeared uninjured, and it was immediately brought by the finder to Sir W——, as the leader of the party. Sir W—— stopped for a moment to examine this strange treasure-trove, and, though much pressed for time, was able to loosen the cover and to

ascertain that the cylinder contained a large scroll of fine vellum closely covered with minute writing. In the fading light, Sir W——, who had many matters of professional importance to think of, gave only a cursory glance at the manuscript itself, which he fancied must be connected with some of the ancient inhabitants of Peru. Without examining the parchment closely, he thereupon packed away the cylinder in his baggage and made no further effort to elucidate its nature until his return to Lima. My friend was here considerably astonished to find that the MS. which had so strangely fallen into his hands was written, not in some antique or unknown language and characters, but in neat though exceedingly small English script, with the sole exception of one short sentence in Latin—added apparently by another hand and in a different ink—in which the Latin writer begged the finder of the cylinder to take the enclosed scroll of vellum to the nearest English or American consulate. But for this Latin request, which was inserted at the beginning of the manuscript in a most prominent manner, the whole was written in fair nervous English, which it became easy to decipher, so soon as the reader had grown accustomed to the crabbedness of the writing, that had evidently been produced by an exiguity of space.

By one of those curious but happy chances which sometimes occur in life, Sir W—— was still more astonished to discover that the name of the author

was not only familiar to him, but that he actually had once owned a slight acquaintance with him. More than this, Sir W——, who is one of my dearest and oldest friends, knew that I had been intimate with the writer of this parchment, who (as he thought) had been dead for some years. Sir W—— therefore, though greatly puzzled by the whole inscrutable occurrence, very wisely made no further mention of his discovery, but on his return to England brought the manuscript direct to me at my room in the British Museum. After a long discussion between us, Sir W—— voluntarily made over all arrangements in the matter of publishing or suppressing the contents of the scroll to myself, and indeed, so to speak, washed his hands of all further responsibility in the matter, which had apparently somewhat affected his nerves or his spirits. I have only to add, with regard to the original owner of the MS., that Sir W——, when at Lima, showed the metal case to various persons employed at the museum there, and that all these experts unanimously declared that this object itself could never have been produced by any of the aboriginal inhabitants of Peru; whilst the metal, a species of platinum, was, so far as they were aware, unknown on our planet. And this verdict of the officials at Lima is, I believe, perfectly correct.

As to the authenticity of the MS., I may at once state that the account contained therein coincides in every particular with the evidence that was

produced at the time of its alleged author's mysterious disappearance. I have had for many years an intimate acquaintance, amounting to a cordial friendship, with the writer, A—— B——. I do not necessarily concur with all that he states later on as to his exceptional mental gifts; nor do I consider his close self-analysis as altogether a correct one. Still, I think his own views on his attainments, his natural genius, his complete failure, and his outlook on life are sincere. Though highly nervous and sensitive by nature, and a prey to constant fits of depression, neither I nor any of his friends, would ever have suspected him of a tendency to suicide. We were indeed, all of us, fully as surprised as we were grieved to learn through the newspapers of November ——, 19—, the details of what we most assuredly at that date considered to have been his own deliberate act of self-destruction. For there can be no question but that A—— B—— had made beforehand plans for his contemplated disappearance; the letter of instruction he wrote to his brother, the careful packing of his valuables at his lodgings, and the sudden payment on the morning that he was last seen of certain outstanding bills clearly point to this surmise. We are however now confronted since the strange discovery of the manuscript with two theories as to his end; did A—— B—— really perish on the beach at Dover; or did he evanish from his own world of men in order to start a new life under new conditions? His

clothing, we know, was found lying on the bare ground carefully held down by stones and boulders, and in his pockets were some money and a few personal trifles of value. Nevertheless, it is just possible he may have changed into some other garb, and thus disguised have made his escape whither none could trace him. This second theory is however highly improbable, seeing that his age was over forty, his temperament on the whole normal, and his health indifferent; so that I merely mention it here to show that the suggestion has not escaped my own inquiring mind. The conclusion however which both the police and his relatives held was that A—— B—— had in some fit of frenzy or despair plunged naked into the sea, wherein he had been speedily drowned; for it was a cold stormy night. It is true the actual body was never recovered, but professional and amateur alike were agreed on the point of suicide whilst of unsound mind. That the manuscript is a literary jest perpetrated in the name of A—— B—— is also most unlikely, for though he was an author of some talent and repute, his mere name certainly had not the glamour requisite to draw special attention to any posthumous publication. At the risk therefore of being considered credulous, or even crazy, I have come to the deliberate decision that the whole marvellous story as set forth on the parchment is essentially true; and that the events described therein are not the figments of any imagination, sane or insane. If

this is the case (which I do not for one moment doubt), then we possess an inestimable account of a planet other than our own. On the other hand, were it a fraud of an elaborate nature, as has been suggested, we have simply a treatise dealing with a Utopia in the stars, just one of those sterile semi-descriptive, semi-political effusions that the speculative human mind has produced from time to time. The record of Meleager and of its unique Secret, of which the author claims to know the existence but not the working details, is either a matter of surpassing interest, or else it is but a literary trifle, a jejune compound of material borrowed from Plato, Sir Thomas More, Rabelais, James Harington, Dean Swift, Samuel Butler, H. G. Wells, and Heaven only knows how many other inventors in a similar vein, both ancient and modern, English and foreign. Once more I repeat my full belief in the writer's veracity and in the substantial truth of all his many adventures. As I write this, I have lying on my desk before me that same strange metal cylinder, and that exquisitely prepared roll of vellum; and whenever I take these objects in my hands I really feel that I am fingering a message in a tangible form from a friend and fellow-mortal who has passed hence to another planet.

I have only to add that in editing the MS. I have deemed it expedient to omit here and there a few passages which might perhaps tend to prejudice

the reader against A—— B—— himself; the fact being patent to me that the author, after some years of residence in another and a wholly diverse moral and physical atmosphere, has somehow imbibed notions and theories that may clash with some of the recognised conventions and standards of this our world, which was also once his own. These omissions do not however mar the general trend of the narrative; and if any authorised persons may conceive a serious desire to peruse these excerpts, I shall willingly acquaint them with what is missing from the text.

PART ONE

I

I BEGIN my manuscript in the palace of the Child of the Sun in a distant world, thus relieving a mind that is apt to grow weary of mere splendour and adulation by imagining the possibility of communicating on some future day with those who were not so long ago my fellow-men and fellow-mortals on the planet I have left, never to return. Though brightness and beauty are around me in my new abode, yet a constant longing for the drab unattainable past grips me with a feverish eagerness, so that I find some small solace in placing on record from time to time my impressions of a place and a people whose existence I had never suspected until a few hours before I was hurried, a humble subject out of the Earth, to dwell as ruler of an alien sphere. Whether or no I shall ever gain the opportunity of committing this message to its desired goal I know not; but at the present moment it suits my fancy and soothes my unquiet brain to believe in the ultimate feasibility of such an event. So I shall open by relating with the utmost brevity the earlier and earthly, and therefore less interesting, portion of my career.

I had already passed by some few years the age of forty, at which landmark of life, so Count Alfieri discovered long ago, man ceases to cherish illusions,

and seeks to look back upon the irredeemable past with feelings of self-satisfaction or of regret, as his case may be. My own reflections after passing this Rubicon of time were anything but agreeable, when I paused to consider the years that had slipped by between my period of youth and that of middle age, and had to confess that all my early ambitions had petered out in nothingness. I had signally failed in all things; I had plainly proved myself

> "too weak to put my shoulder to the wheel
> Which Fortune offers all to push or leave."

And yet, despite my laziness, my lack of initiative, my sacrifices to dull Convention, my timidity and my vacillation, I could not help harbouring a dull dim fury of resentment against Fate itself. I realised that I was the owner of high and original genius, yet this had omitted to imprint its proper mark in the world; and further, I argued that it was not wholly through my own fault that my latent virtues had never developed. The finest and most useful piece of machinery remains valueless and inert unless there be a skilled workman to set its mechanism in motion, to oil its cogs, and generally to supervise its action. So in my own case, the mental mechanism was all there ready to perform and needing but the touch of a sympathetic human hand to inspire its dormant possibilities. Some of the foremost characters in history have owed their fame and their success to the judicious but un-

appreciated help of persons of an inferior calibre, whose very names are often unknown to posterity; then why could not I have been permitted the service of some exterior force, some understanding coadjutor, to awaken the gigantic strength that was slumbering in myself?

Thus in my case a boyhood full of promise, yet a boyhood ever repressed and misunderstood, ripened into an early manhood of diffidence and irresolution. The golden years glided by unprofitably, until at length they reached the grand climacteric, when I found myself straying in a barren and deserted portion of the plain of life. A mental and physical weariness began to enfold me; the sense of failure at times was certainly keen and cutting as a razor, still I contrived by various devices to blunt its edge. I had indeed obtained some slight distinction in the sphere of literature, so that I was fain to feed my hungry disappointed soul with such crumbs or stale food of gratulation as fell to me from the small circle of those who admired my works, concerning which I myself can honestly say that I neither professed nor felt the smallest pride. A few trifles from my pen may possibly live in the general literature of Britain, mostly in verse, for poetry is often less perishable than prose in such instances as mine. Nevertheless, I recognised myself as a partial failure in the domain of letters, as I was admittedly a complete failure in the departments of politics, of thought, of influence, of philosophy.

Naturally, with such bitter matter for reflection, my equanimity was liable to serious disturbance what time the sharp edge of this haunting sense of a life's bankruptcy pricked my all-too-sensitive skin. At such periods long-drawn fits of depression would invade me. Though at first these would dissolve and would often leave a marked flow of gaiety and hopefulness behind them, yet such attacks grew stronger and more frequent, whilst the subsequent recovery was less ecstatic in its nature. It was during one of these temporary obsessions of brooding care that I encountered the one and only adventure of my life, the adventure indeed that, in one aspect, terminated it, as I shall presently relate. For I have only written thus much concerning my interior state of mind and my physical health to impress on the reader that, apparent failure as I was and void of all worldly success, yet I still possessed the clear inner consciousness of mental powers that far exceeded those of all my more fortunate acquaintances, and were perhaps equalled amongst very few contemporary persons whatsoever. My call to action came at last; the master hand at the eleventh hour put the rusty machinery of my unique mind in motion; and I have answered to that call, and am now employing for a worthy purpose those superior talents that, not altogether by reason of my own laches, had so long lain idle.

. . . . . .

One November evening in the year 19—, whilst under the shadow of one of my recurring moods of melancholy, I made my way to the Café Royale in Regent Street, where I sat down and ordered a glass of absinthe. And here I may as well state that I am no drunkard, and that I have never sought to dispel my fits of depression by the aid of the wine-cup. Occasionally, however, I used to drink a glass of absinthe, as an excuse for visiting this foreign tavern, this latter-day Petty France in London, whose alien quality always tended to reduce my misery, for I found relaxation in the gruff Continental voices of the guests, in the sight and scent of the foreign liquors, in the garish Parisian decorations of the long low room, and in the unceasing chink of the dominoes on the marble-topped tables. I had already poured the ice-cold water upon the thin tablet of sugar reposing on the silver sifter that I had placed across the goblet, and was watching the clouded liquor below assume the yellow and green tints of the peridot, when I noticed a stranger enter the doorway, glance quickly round at the noisy crowd assembled, and then seat himself deliberately in the vacant chair opposite to me. With a languid interest I observed the new-comer, trying to recall his face, which somehow seemed vaguely familiar to me. As this personage is to figure presently as my liberator, my mentor, my particular *deus ex machinâ*, I may as well describe him here to the best of my ability. He was short, and a little inclined to

stoutness; he was apparently about my own age, and was fashionably but quietly dressed; he was also obviously not an Englishman. His complexion was swarthy, even hinting at some possible admixture of Oriental blood, but his features were small, regular and far from unpleasing. His dark hair and moustache were grizzled; he had intelligent brown eyes and regular teeth; his voice showed an agreeable intonation as he ordered François to bring him some coffee. Having given his order, the stranger looked fixedly at me for a moment, the while stroking his chin with a delicate well-kept hand. Suddenly he addressed me, only to offer me the evening paper which he had brought with him. I thanked him, and seeing him thus anxious to converse, I made some commonplace remark on the badness of the weather. He replied with alacrity, and by the time the waiter had returned with his coffee the stranger and I were chatting affably. He spoke excellent English, but with an accent that caused me to speculate on his possible nationality. After we had indulged thus in small talk for ten minutes or more, my neighbour, assuming a graceful hesitation of manner, inquired of me whether my name were not A—— B——. Greatly surprised, I assented; whereupon the foreigner, with a well-bred apology for what he called his liberty of attitude towards me, stated that he was a sincere admirer of my books, and then proceeded to allude to them in a manner which showed plainly enough that at least

he had read them. He praised my work warmly, complimented me on the subjects I had chosen for research, on my lucid style and on other points. Now, there are few persons who are not susceptible to praise or flattery, and I am no exception to the general rule, provided only that the praise (or flattery) be applied with a delicate brush and not with a trowel. The discriminating approval therefore of this distinguished-looking foreigner acted like a sedative to my jarred nerves, so that the cloud of depression hanging over my head began rapidly to disperse. We talked and argued with animation over my books and their themes, with which my unknown companion seemed to possess a most intimate acquaintance. Time raced rapidly during this congenial duologue, the clock above the bar denoting the flight of a full hour before my comrade broached the matter of his own identity, which could scarcely in politeness be withheld much longer. Taking a leather case from his breast-pocket, he produced a visiting card, which he handed to me, explaining to me at the same moment that he was of Italian parentage though born in the Argentine, where he followed the occupation of a merchant in connection with a large English commercial house holding concessions in Peru and Bolivia. The card bore the name " Signor Arrigo d'Aragno," and an address in Buenos Aires. Then, glancing hastily at the clock, he made some remark about an important business appointment and expressed deep

concern at this abrupt ending of our agreeable conversation. With some slight hesitation however he ventured to ask whether I would not give him the extreme pleasure of my company at dinner that night, provided I would excuse such an invitation from a complete stranger after so short an acquaintance. I happened to be disengaged that day, with the uninviting prospect of a solitary evening at my club before me; and my alacrity in accepting his hospitality caused obvious satisfaction to Signor d'Aragno, who named one of the large London hotels for our trysting-place. We shook hands cordially, and separated with a warm *a rivederla.*

Arrived punctually at eight o'clock at the —— Hotel, I was shown upstairs to my host's private apartment, and a few moments later we two were sitting at table and resuming our interrupted discussion of the Café Royale. By the time we had reached the stage of dessert, and the waiters had retired, this topic had somewhat flagged, and the conversation now took on a more personal complexion. The praise that had hitherto been lavishly accorded to my books was now deftly and tactfully —though of course I was unaware of the change at the actual time—shifted to myself and my exceptional gifts of mind. Leading skilfully from one point to another, d'Aragno finally stated his opinion that my inherent genius, my political views, and my remarkable culture were altogether such as

marked me out as a person born to rule, as a Homeric *anax andrōn*. The generous wine I had swallowed, the intoxicating but judicious adulation and insinuating personality of my host alike operated to arouse in me that keen desire for power I had ofttimes secretly indulged in; whilst at the same time they generated an indescribable sense of bitterness against the world at large for its neglect or ignorance of so marvellous a genius as mine. I am certain now (though at the time I was quite unconscious of its employment) the will of my companion was working with every force at its command to communicate with my brain and to instil therein the full appreciation of the special object he had in view. We proceeded to higher and higher planes of argument; the famous names of history fell frequently from our lips, as we spoke of the ideal Prince of Machiavelli, of the demi-god of Corsica, of the super-man of Nietzsche, of the mystical powers wielded by the Pope of Rome and the Dalai Lama. The hours flew by on rosy wings; midnight had passed, and the gong of Big Ben had just hurled its solitary stroke of one o'clock booming through the dank foggy air without that enveloped a London grown at last comparatively silent. How well do I recall that precise moment! The reverberation of the clanging knell had scarcely subsided when my host, making a brusque movement in his chair, bluntly placed the great proposition before me, and offered me a kingdom, though not a kingdom of this world!

II

Before attempting to give a short and, I hope, a tolerably coherent account of my lengthy nocturnal interview with Arrigo d'Aragno, of his amazing statements and proposals, and of my own half-hearted and intermittent struggles against his invading powers of persuasion, I must state first of all that the whole incident rises before me at this moment with crystal clearness. Even now, in these exotic surroundings, I can see with my mind's eye that commonplace hotel parlour with its ugly luxurious furniture and its flamboyant wall-paper of scarlet patterned with a design of raised and gilded vine-leaves. In this room for several hours my host continued to address me with scarcely a pause, except at one or two points when I feebly ventured to stem the torrent of his extraordinary discourse. The open allurements, the veiled warnings, the cynical wisdom, the biting indictments of our own existing conditions of society, together composed a strange medley of arguments, which were intended to convince me of the absolute necessity of my immediate and unconditional submission to his carefully prepared scheme. And this scheme was no less than the complete surrender of myself, mind

and body, into his keeping for the purpose of being transported whilst in an unconscious or comatose state and by some hidden means to another planet! I cannot of course recall the whole of that prodigal information, nor all the astonishing things he confided in me; but I do remember vividly throughout the whole of this mental ordeal that I always remained fully aware of my host's sanity. He talked the dreams of madmen, as judged by our conventional standards of science and belief; yet I knew, instinctively knew, all his bizarre statements to be fact and not fiction. Was some irresistible hypnotic force, I wonder, emanating from that will and besieging my own overwrought brain, to compel my full credence in the apparently incredible? In any case, believe I did absolutely. I grew to realise also, dimly at first, but with increasing clarity, that a refusal on my part was now practically unthinkable. Of a truth my choice lay between a swift and certain death on Earth and a new career in another planet; and as the ties that bound me to Earth were neither very strong nor very dear, whilst my curiosity was boundless, I was filled with tense excitement but not with real alarm at the prospect opened before me. With hardly an attempt at opposition, therefore, I allowed myself to become permeated through and through with the psychical current of my companion's will to power, ignoring my shrewd presentiment of intense danger ahead in the event of my seeking to decline that which I most

ardently longed for despite a few passing qualms. Beyond a doubt I was completely in the toils, but I experienced no anxiety to escape thence.

. . . . . .

Directing his eyes full upon my face with a concentrated stare that held my attention fixed and unwavering, d'Aragno started, and his harangue proceeded with scarcely a break for four hours, of which here I can only inscribe a few disjointed fragments. "You progressive and enlightened peoples of the important planet known as the Earth have in your own estimation acquired an immense store of knowledge, not only of things terrestrial but also of the entire scheme celestial. Your astronomers talk glibly of the presence of various metals in the Moon, of the luminous rings of Saturn, of artificial canals in Mars; you reckon with accuracy on the times and seasons of the wandering comets which you christen by the names of their discoverers—and yet, and yet you have not learnt our secret, The Secret! . . .

"On your aerial charts there is marked a tiny planet belonging to our solar system which your scientists, following an absurd method of nomenclature from the venue of classical mythology, have dubbed Meleager. Being small, it is held of no account by your star-gazing wiseacres, whilst the average layman of intelligence has probably never so much as heard its name. Is not that so? Have you yourself any knowledge of its existence? (I

shook my head.) Now let me tell you that Meleager is an Earth in miniature; its inhabitants, its natural features, its vegetation, its fauna have all developed under identical conditions in the past, so that, were any traveller from Herthus to be unexpectedly translated thither, he would almost certainly imagine he had only found his way to some hitherto unexplored subtropical region of his own Earth. *I* am a native of Meleager, and I am moreover one of its small band of citizens who possess its secret, which has been handed down from its original inventors to their successors through countless centuries of time. How, when and by whom The Secret came into existence I know not; and did I know, I should not inform you; but this much I am empowered to say; there is intercommunication of long standing between our small planet and your larger one; or rather, to use exact language, a limited knot of persons in Meleager own the power of visiting your Earth from time to time for certain purposes, one of which I shall presently disclose to you, as it concerns intimately our meeting and conversation this night. It is now five years and more since I have been dwelling in an alien world, making a careful scrutiny in connection with the mission that has been entrusted me by the innermost circle of the ruling caste which alone controls the polity of Meleager. I am, as it were, an ambassador to the Earth, but one whose credentials have never been presented, who has no staff of

legation, no chancellery, and whose position is one-sided, for it is unknown to, and unacknowledged by, the countries to which he has been sent. I have been commanded to inquire into and report upon many terrestrial matters of concern to us, but my leading task is being brought to its termination to-day. . . .

" My supreme duty is to choose an earth-born King for our planet. Our constitution, which is the logical outcome of the most deliberate and far-seeing policy for many generations, requires the presence in our midst of a sovereign drawn from another sphere, and that sphere is of necessity the Earth, for we in Meleager hold no communication with any other planet in Cosmos. At intervals, as expediency or necessity may dictate, a new king has to be sought and found by the Meleagrian envoy on the Earth, whose task presents, as you may suppose, extreme, well-nigh insuperable difficulties. I am tied down by certain stringent rules, and to those rules I must strictly adhere. We demand a man of intelligence, a man of good birth and breeding, one of fine presence, and last of all an individual of a fair complexion and with blue eyes. This final condition may strike you as absurd, but then the Meleagrians are a dark race with dark skins and dark eyes and hair, as you may perceive in my own person; and in their fixed opinion their extraneous ruler must be the scion of an immortal stock, a member of the family of the Sun, who alone is worshipped in Meleager. Our priests by the aid

of cunning devices and mystical potions, as also by means of the waters of a certain Fountain of Rejuvenation, whose exact locale is only known to our Arch-priest and a few chosen colleagues, can improve both mentally and bodily the individual who is translated and handed over to their care. Nevertheless, the raw material counts for a good deal—as you express it in one of your homely English proverbs: 'One cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear'; and on the same analogy even our skilful ministers of state would be unable to construct the true substance of a Child of the Sun-god out of an inferior Herthian mortal. The nicest caution has therefore to be observed in the work of selection. For nearly three years now I have been busily seeking, and can at last congratulate myself on having obtained the requisite material, the potential dross that will later be converted into pure gold. For some time past I have been on your track without arousing the smallest suspicion in your mind, and now at length I have grasped the favourable, the critical, the final moment in which I claim you for this most exalted, and indeed most sacred office. . . .

"You are thoroughly out of touch with your own age and with your own country in a special degree, and for my purpose your deep-rooted dissatisfaction causes in me on the contrary the most intense satisfaction. You have grown disgusted with the decadence of your Royal House; you are sick of the

greed and frivolity of your aristocracy; you abhor the mischievous methods and aims of your unscrupulous demagogues in power; you shrink from the violence and brutishness of your all-powerful mob; you lament the utter incapacity of the few serious and honest politicians who yet survive. You mourn over the industrial devastation and the uglifying of your once-beautiful world; you turn with horror from the blatant arrogance of the ruling gang of financiers, who with the besotted populace mean to involve the whole world in a final sordid struggle for mastery. On all sides you see nothing but rapid change upon change, all for the worse; the rooting-out of all that is good, artistic and ennobling, and the substitution of all that is vile and mercenary. . . .

"You are obsessed with the same hatred of this evil transformation as are we ourselves, the ruling body in Meleager, who utilise your planet now, not as in the past for purposes of imitation and guidance, but for serious warnings as to what to avoid in our own future course of polity. For in Meleager we still set before us as our main striving-point Univerversal Content, not so-called industrial and educational Progress and the mere amassing of wealth. The happiness of all is, and always has been, the sole aim of our statesmen, and we firmly hold that the various theories of equality that are so advertised and belauded on your Earth are in reality most deadly poisons that are being injected into the

corporate mass of humanity. One of the leading saints of your Christian Church has wisely said that in every house are to be found vessels alike formed to honour and to dishonour, yet that, as they are all equally necessary, so viewed in that reasonable light are they all equally honourable. Thus in our government of Meleager do we recognise the clear necessity of the various grades of society which form the total fabric of every healthy and happy state; whilst we reject with scorn and loathing the specious notions that, under the guise of an equality that has no real existence, endeavour to weld all society into one drab dismal detestable whole. . . .

" Nowadays everything that is ordered or orderly you worldlings have set out to destroy. Your barbarian hordes broke up the stable Roman Empire; your fanatical reformers and greedy monarchs destroyed the consolidating features of the Middle Ages, which though very far from being perfect yet presented many illuminating features which we deemed expedient to copy in Meleager. In recent years your death-dealing guns and your proselytising emissaries have destroyed wantonly the vast matured civilisations of China and Japan and Burmah, which are now rapidly casting out all their antique virtues and are fast absorbing all the vice and vulgarity of the West. Every community, howsoever poor or insignificant, yet content to work out its own salvation and be governed by its own ancient laws and customs, and consequently happy

and healthy according to its own lights, you have disturbed and dismembered. . . .

"Everywhere and every day the beautiful is retreating before the utilitarian; smoke and noise pollute the greenest and loveliest valleys of Europe and America; dirt and disease increase in spite of your undoubted advances in medical science, whose services are given over to the individual who will pay for them rather than to the community at large. One sees the feeble and the cretinous of your world breeding like flies, whilst those of a better condition and in sound health are found too selfish and too tenacious of their ease to undertake the trouble or expense connected with the rearing of a family. Epidemics continue, and in the form of a gift of Western civilisation are allowed to sweep away whole tribes and nations of wholesome primitive peoples; your most loathsome and yet preventable diseases of contagion still hold sway, either by reason of your own indifference or from false ideals of a prudery that, I confess, wholly passes my own comprehension. Over all your Earth the universal craving for wealth at any cost of morals or self-respect has settled like a blight. All pleasures of the intellect are rapidly ceasing to attract, and the extravagance and debauchery of the ostentatious rich are announced by your odious vassal Press as the sole objects worthy of attainment or imitation to-day. . . .

"You slaughter and exterminate your rare

animals and your beautiful birds in order that your women may adorn themselves with their pelts and plumage, and even now in this cold weather I have watched your fine ladies daily walking in your noisy, crowded streets of London, half-naked yet wholly unashamed, with their limbs and bosoms exposed equally to the bitter wind and the lascivious eye of the stranger, whilst masses of costly furs, the spoils of innocent and peaceful animals, are heaped upon their pampered bodies. . . .

"Whither are you being driven in this mad stampede after so-called progress and knowledge? In what morass will this mocking will-o'-the-wisp ultimately entice and overwhelm you? . . . I see chicanery and disbelief possess your churches and their priests; a clinging to stipends and a craving for personal leadership seem to me to have become the sole guides of such as are themselves supposed to guide their flocks. Everywhere change, restlessness, cynicism, vulgarity, extravagance, crime, hypocrisy, covetousness, greed, cringing, selfishness in every form are rampant; what sensitive mind would not instinctively recoil from contact with such a changing world? Can a nature such as your own endure to be associated with such a mass of passive squalor and of active evil? Are you not more than ready to welcome some chance of escape from such an uncongenial environment? . . .

"As you confess in your heart the utter collapse of your early aims here on Earth—so must you

recognise your unique chance to attain to something higher than even you dreamed of in your youthful moods of hope and ambition. You will be re-incarnated as the Child of the Sun, after you are once translated to Meleager. That is a part, but a part only, of The Secret, which perhaps already you are inclined to regard as The Fraud. And yet, if fraud it be, its ultimate aim is a beneficent and unselfish one, for it has been practised in order to keep a whole population happy and content. . . ."

" And herewith I think I had now better give you some instructions, or rather hints, as to your new position and as to your proper attitude towards the governing caste of Meleager on your arrival there. As King, the Child of the Sun is invested with a species of sovereignty that has no exact counter-part on your Earth. Your high office in Meleager partakes in some respects of the nature of a King of England, of a Pope of Rome, of an old-time Sultan of Baghdad, of a modern colonial governor; yet it is itself no one of these things. To sustain your part you will be reincarnated after your long sleep, and you will awake to find yourself endued with a fresh supply of youth and energy, whilst all your acquired learning and ripe experience of a lifetime already more than half consumed will abide in your brain. There now remains for you the final stage of all on Earth, that of putting yourself and your future unreservedly and confidently in my hands. . . ."

There followed an abrupt spell of silence in which d'Aragno scrutinised me closely. I knew not why, but I had begun to experience a sort of repulsion against his arrogance in thus presuming obedience on my part before ever I had signified my assent. I felt in some wise bound to protest against this assumption of my readiness to obey, and accordingly I made a protest rather out of personal vanity than from any depth of rebellious feeling.

"And suppose, sir, I decide not to accept your proposal? Suppose I refuse absolutely and doggedly to accede to your demand, whatever the consequence to myself? What then?"

D'Aragno rose from his chair, thrust both hands into the pockets of his dress jacket, and took up a position on the hearth-rug before the dying embers of the fire. A curious expression, which I quite failed to analyse, spread over his features, as he regarded me sternly for some moments in silence. At length he spoke:

"Your objection I do not regard as sincere. It is idle, and has been prompted, I am convinced, by a vague sense of wounded dignity on your part. Perhaps I have been not sufficiently considerate to your proper pride. You are anxious to 'save your face,' as you express it in your English idiom. I therefore refuse to take your question seriously. You have, I know, in your heart the fullest intention of complying with my arrangements." A pause ensued, and he added with indifference: "In any

case, do you suppose for an instant that I have thus spoken to you openly of THE SECRET with the smallest possibility of my sharing it with any living mortal on your Earth? In reality you have no choice left you. Whether you follow or refuse to follow my lead, your connection with your own world is already severed. Need I make the case any clearer to an intelligence such as yours?"

Again a spell of silence, which was ended by the harsh five strokes of the Westminster clock resounding through the heavy air. With the final reverberation I bowed my head, and simply said: "I am ready."

It may have been only my fancy, but I *thought* I detected a shade of relief pass over that now sinister face; at any rate, the pleasant earnest look had returned when d'Aragno muttered quietly as though to himself; "I never felt a moment's doubt!"

Again I essayed a question, this time, one that was really agitating my mind: "As I am unalterably and inevitably destined to fill the throne of your kingdom in Meleager, surely I may be permitted to ask you for how long a period I am to enjoy the position that has been thus allotted to me? How many years can I expect to rule in this realm whence there is obviously no return? Is my reign to continue till the end of my natural mortal life, or is it to be prolonged indefinitely by mysterious measures, such as you have already hinted at?"

D'Aragno stroked his chin meditatively for some

minutes and then replied in a placid voice; "That at least is a reasonable and proper question, though I have not the knowledge to answer it as you could wish or might reasonably expect. I was an infant when our late king came to be crowned, and he has ceased to rule since my sojourn on the Earth—that is to say, his tenure of office must have lasted some forty years. Thus for three years or more our realm has been without a monarch, so that the whole community in all its classes has begun to clamour vigorously for a successor, and hence the task of selection wherewith I have been entrusted, and which I am now bringing to a close. Our late king was, I fear, unfortunate in his relations with our priestly or governing class, and by his own folly rendered his office a source of real danger to our whole system of administration. I have every reason to believe no such catastrophe is likely to occur in your case. Your native endowments of head and heart, combined with the additional advantages of youth and wisdom that you will obtain on your arrival in Meleager, will protect you sufficiently from such an untimely ending. Yet I warn you, you will require all your faculties, especially those of self-restraint and discretion, if you are to win and retain the good will and co-operation of that all-powerful hierarchy which is actually not only your master but in a certain sense also your creator. It used to be said in ancient Rome that two augurs could never pass in the public streets without

smiling—well, you must first of all learn to repress that classical grimace, and be content to abide ever with a solemn countenance in an atmosphere of make-believe. Moreover, the desirability of such an attitude ought not to irritate a person who like yourself is filled with a divine discontent. You will be the glorious and adored figure-head of a community wherein the maximum of human happiness and content has been already attained. But I shall not pursue this dissertation further. With my warning voice ever whispering in your ears, and with your natural tact and intelligence to guide you, I am sure you will not fail. As to the length of your reign, I cannot tell you what I myself do not know. But this much I can honestly say, and that is, its duration will wholly depend on your own action, and on your relations with the senators, who alone possess the sources of power that are essential to your continued maintenance in office. For aught I know to the contrary, our priests, by means of their marvellous recipes and contrivances, may be able to prolong your life, and even your youth, indefinitely for centuries. But I do not speak with authority; I can only repeat that the extent of your reign depends very largely on your own behaviour."

"On one other matter I should also like to be informed," interposed I, "and I trust you will not condemn this question as superfluous. Tell me, why out of all the inhabitants of the Earth have I, a bankrupt in worldly glory and success, a person

of mediocre attainments and the owner of no special gifts of beauty or rank, thus been chosen to fill so exalted a position? I ask from sheer curiosity, and from no subtle desire to plead my unfitness as an excuse to decline your proffered, and indeed accepted, honour."

My companion seemed to approve my question. A humorous look flitted over his features as he dryly answered: "You are fully justified in your inquiry; but you must recall that I have already mentioned that, though your world is large, my own field of choice is very limited. Our King, as I have already said, must be naturally a true Child of the Sun; in other words, he must be tall, fair, blue-eyed. This is essential, and such restrictions practically limit my search to your northern races, and mainly to such as are of Teutonic stock. Secondly, our King elect must be of middle age, for past experience and a ripe intelligence are also necessary to our plans. Thirdly, he must be either a bachelor or a widower, and preferably a misogynist at heart. He must not quit the Earth homesick; he must not be a natural prey to the influence of women, so far as it is possible to guard against this danger, the mainspring of all our fears in Meleager. For the sheer possibility of the founding of a royal race springing from the union of the Child of the Sun with a maiden of Meleager is a constant cause of alarm and watchfulness on the part of our hierarchy. Not to mention the mischief resulting from any such intrigue to our

body politic, the possible birth of a Prince, a connecting link between the Divine and the Human, might in a few days, nay, in a few hours, shatter in pieces the whole edifice of the present system of government that it has taken so many centuries of unremitting wisdom and state craft to erect. Surely I need not dwell on this all-important phase? Last of all, we must have a comely personality and gentle birth combined with high intellectual gifts and training. This combination of qualities is not so easy to discover as it ought to be on your Earth. Your handsome nobles are either illiterate or debauched, and are often both simultaneously; or else they are slaves to family ties or to female influence in some form; whilst those who are both noble by birth and breeding and also highly cultivated are usually undesirable for our high purpose owing to their physical defects. In spite of all this, there are doubtless many hundreds of persons living who would be eligible and would answer to all our requirements as well as or even better than yourself; nevertheless, after much reflection I have good reason to suppose that the hierarchy of Meleager, whose envoy and servant I am, will find no cause of quarrel with my choice."

Six o'clock struck out on the foggy morning air, as d'Aragno finished speaking thus, and I grew aware of the renewed vitality pulsing once more in the surrounding London streets. "One more matter, however, I must speak of," suddenly

ejaculated my host, " before we can freely discuss the final arrangements. I do not aspire to know what difference, if any, your impending transit to another planet will entail in regard to your chances of existence in the Hereafter. On your Earth, I understand, men hold the most varied and contradictory opinions and theories on this subject; and even in your Christian section of humanity I gather there is no real unanimity on this point. We in Meleager have our own ideals and beliefs in the Hereafter, but these are purely speculative, for none has ever returned to us from the domain beyond the grave to tell us the true details, and none other can supply them; we accordingly let the great question rest without laying down dogmas of necessary belief. But whether in the Other Life you will be judged or treated as a denizen of the Earth or of Meleager, I cannot imagine. I think it my duty however to remind you of this anomaly in case it may have escaped your notice, for I am well aware what strong hopes of endless happiness many members of your Christian churches build on the shadowy world yonder. From my own observations I know you yourself are fairly punctual in your religious prayers and duties, and I have always welcomed such an attitude as edifying on your part; but as to what are your real views and beliefs on the question of the Other Life I have naturally no clue. On this one matter therefore I admit you run a certain problematical risk in your translation to

our star; but at the same time I cannot conceive that your future interest in an unseen, unknown, undescribed and unsubstantial world could be of sufficient import or strength to compel you to struggle against your natural desire to rule as a king in another sphere, perhaps for a stretch of time that would be out of all proportion to your earthly span of life."

He ceased suddenly, and kneeling at my feet said slowly in a suave voice that was not wholly free from irony: "And now let me tender my most respectful homage to the King elect of the planet of Meleager!"

D'Aragno then rose, and for the next hour discussed with me the necessary steps to be taken before the consummation of his mission on our Earth.

III

It was long after seven o'clock when I found myself walking home in the grey drizzle of the early morning. As was my custom when in town during the last few years I rented a bedroom at my club in St James's, and the apparition of myself in evening dress at the club doorway at that unusual hour of return evoked a momentary look of surprise on the face of the well-trained porter who was then sweeping the hall in his shirt-sleeves. Making my way up to my bed-chamber, I proceeded to carry out the first portion of my late instructions from d'Aragno. This consisted in swallowing a tumblerful of cold water in which I had previously dissolved the contents of a small packet he had given me before leaving the hotel. After that I undressed and crept into bed. On arising again I felt light as air, with the additional sensation of being several inches taller than my actual stature. My mind too had become singularly clear and active, so that I was enabled to carry out all my intended preparations with ease. First of all I placed my valuables in my trunk, which I locked; then I dressed myself in a tweed suit, and made my way downstairs to the club smoking-room, where I quietly undertook the final details I considered necessary before my

departure from this world. I had no parents living; my brothers and sisters were all married and had their own homes; I had no debts, and my few outstanding bills could be easily settled by my executors, for some few years before I had signed a will that I deemed fair and adequate. There was nobody to lose in any material sense by my sudden demise; on the contrary, my brothers would obtain possession of my property, for I was the owner of a small landed estate and of a meagre income that was the source of secret but intense bitterness to me under this present oppression of plutocracy. I had therefore no more arduous task before me than to compose a letter to my favourite brother, so that he could easily infer from its contents that I had decided to make away with my life. This might have proved an unpleasant theme for composition under different circumstances, but on this occasion I experienced no difficulty in expressing myself to my own satisfaction.

This last matter accomplished, and one or two cheques to tradesmen signed and posted, I put on my overcoat and hat, and sallied out of the club towards noon. A feeling of lightness of body combined with a sense of calm exaltation of mind assisted me, as I walked slowly through the muddy streets towards the National Gallery, one of my most frequent haunts in London. Here I spent about an hour in sauntering through the huge rooms hung with the glowing works of the Old Masters,

stopping occasionally to admire some special favourite, and even studying with interest a recent addition to the collection that hung on a solitary screen. Quitting the gallery, I crossed Trafalgar Square, the while sensing the gush of its fountains and gazing at Landseer's stolid lions; thence I strolled down the length of Whitehall as far as Westminster with its majestic group of Gothic towers, and after filling my eyes with its bristling outlines against the murky winter's sky, I entered the north portal of the Abbey. Here again I wandered in an erratic but pleasurable frame of mind that I vainly tried to analyse to myself, and after many pacings to and fro in the ancient cloisters, that held so many memories for me, I left the Abbey to proceed very slowly towards Charing Cross by way of the Embankment. According to our prearranged plan, I boarded a certain train that same afternoon for Dover. The journey seemed to me interminable, and as I lay back on the cushions at times I fitfully hoped for some collision that might prove fatal to me; whilst at other moments I grew morbidly nervous lest by some unforeseen accident I might be prevented from reaching my destination in good time.

I alighted at Dover about five o'clock on a raw, cold, windy, showery evening. From the station I passed into the street, and thence, in pursuance of my instructions, I followed a road leading westward. Ere long I had left behind me the suburbs of the

town and was now tramping a dreary exposed thoroughfare that ran between market gardens. As I walked ahead slowly and deliberately, I suddenly saw emerge from a mean inn beside the road a short, thick-set man in seafaring dress and bearing a bundle on his shoulder. I knew him to be d'Aragno, and I continued to follow in his track. He proceeded for some distance along the high road, and then striking abruptly into a by-path amongst the dismal vegetable plots led towards the sea. The lights of Dover were now far behind me, and I realised sharply the fact that I was saying farewell to the kindly and accustomed world of men for ever and aye, and was advancing towards a doom whose nature I only dimly understood. Like Rabelais, I was stepping into the Great Perhaps; I was about to take a plunge into the ocean of the Vast Unknown.

There was no human being in sight save the mariner, and he took no notice of my presence. We began to descend the steep and slippery path towards the beach in the teeth of a tearing gale from the west. The rain was drenching me to the skin; the darkness had increased; once or twice I stumbled heavily. Suddenly my guide turned round and, noting my difficulties, halted to assist me but never spoke a word. With a firm hand he led me down the slope, and shortly we were walking on level ground beside the sea, whose angry waves I could hear close at hand, and could even dis-

tinguish the white foam on their crests as they broke on the shingle. After some minutes of skirting the fore-shore my companion stopped, and, waiting for me to approach, for a second time he seized my hand and thus helped me to climb a small crag that jutted out into the raging surf. Together we reached its summit, where we rested for a moment. Then d'Aragno in a sonorous whisper bade me remove my clothes, and one by one I stripped myself of every sodden garment in the midst of the pitiless gale laden with rain and spray. When I was naked as ever I was born, my companion signed to me to lie down on the flat surface of the rock. I obeyed, and he next produced a small phial which he gave me to drink. Strangely enough in this brief space as I lay numbed and bruised on the sharp clammy bed, buffeted by the wind and stung by the lashing of the rain-drops, two lines from an old Moravian hymn kept buzzing in my brain;

> "Oh, what is Death?—'Tis Life's last shore
> Where vanities are vain no more."

But it could have been only for a minute or so, for d'Aragno was already forcing the phial to my lips, and at the same time helping me to raise my aching head, the better to obey his command. A burning-hot sweetish liquid now raced down my throat; an indescribable sense of warmth and repose began to trickle through every portion of my body; wondrous waves of violet and vermilion

were floating before my eyes or in my brain; in a shorter space than it takes me to write this single sentence I became insensible.

Hours, days, weeks, even months may have elapsed before I happened on my next moment of consciousness. A dim sensation first of floating, and then of being swayed or rocked, filled the vacant interval between my lying on the spray-wetted rock at Dover and my awaking amid unfamiliar surroundings. At the first quiver of sentient life I could see practically nothing; I could only feel that I lay in semi-darkness with my whole frame stretched out vigorously but without pain on a couch which contained a system of pulleys at its head and foot. I was faintly aware of the pressure of this innocuous species of rack, and was trying to open my eyes wider, when an approaching figure waved a censer before my face, and the thick narcotic smoke issuing thence promptly forced my half-awakened mind back into slumber. My next impression was more definite. The chamber wherein I reposed gradually took shape, as it were in patches, such as occurs in cases of recovery from the effects of chloroform after a severe surgical operation. I was no longer extended by pulleys, but rested supine on the couch, whilst three or four persons were busily engaged in kneading and pinching every muscle in my body. My mouth too felt very sore, and by exploring with my tongue I was

astonished to find that several new teeth, evidently drawn from strange mouths, had been recently inserted with exquisite skill in my own gums, for what with the blight of middle age and the inattention of youth my back teeth were by no means numerous at the date of my recent withdrawal from Earth. Whoever my dental surgeon might have been, there could be no two opinions as to his skilful performance on my jaws, for he had not only removed such molars as were decayed or broken, but had planted and made grow freshly plucked substitutes with their bleeding roots. The whole operation was complete, and its completeness has led me to believe that a considerable period must have intervened since my arrival in Meleager, where presumably I was now lying. I noticed that the figures around me were clothed in flowing white robes, and I was beginning to satisfy my curiosity still further when again someone approached with a censer, which he deftly swung so close to my face that once more I was compelled to swallow that thick stupefying incense whose fumes speedily plunged me in oblivion for a second time.

On the third occasion of my awaking, the obscure chamber was still occupied by white-robed figures, but the manipulation of my body had evidently ceased. Among those present I noticed an old man with a white beard, and some inches taller than his colleagues, who paid him special deference. I rightly conjectured this venerable person to be the

Arch-priest, of whom d'Aragno had spoken, both from his evident superiority of rank and his more elaborate garments. I was still feeling very weak and languid, but after staring around me for some minutes with an effort I managed to raise my arm. The action was immediately noticed, whereupon the individual with the censer once more prepared to advance, but was checked by an imperious gesture from the Arch-priest. The latter now approached, and after peering long and steadfastly into my face he made a sign to the others present, and all but two left the room. He then signalled to me to rise, but though I attempted to do so, my physical weakness forbade me, and I sank back exhausted. The two junior priests thereupon firmly raised me in their arms, and half-walking, half-supported I was led out of the chamber to a further and a much larger room, in the centre of which I perceived a wide circular hollow space with steps descending, such as one sees in ancient Italian baptisteries. From this hollow there issued a great sound of gurgling and roaring, as well as a most horrible stench of chemicals, and as I was dragged none too willingly towards the edge I saw below me a pool of dark, sinister-looking, stinking water that was rising and falling in a constant state of ebullition. I made a feeble attempt to struggle, but the Arch-priest laid a firm grip upon my nerveless arm, whilst the two attendant priests hastily proceeded to hook a couple of chains to two stout rings inserted in the

farther wall of the chamber. To these chains was attached a pair of strong leathern slings, which were now skilfully fastened beneath my arm-pits. Thus provided, I was pushed rather than persuaded to descend to the lowest step of the awesome basin, and was then unceremoniously thrust into its bubbling and hissing depths. Down, down, down I went into the icy surge, whose suction I could feel dragging me as violently as though a pair of giant hands beneath the water had hold of both my ankles. Then suddenly gasping and spluttering I was pulled up to the surface, only in spite of my protests to be once again lowered into that awful gelid fountain, whence again after a fearful interval of choking and shivering my body was withdrawn. On the third occasion, however, the two priests drew me towards the steps, and their master signed to me to quit the pool. I exerted myself only too eagerly, and with a nimbleness that amazed me I hastened up the steps towards the Arch-priest, who had been watching the whole gruesome rite with the most solemn air.

No doubt it was as the result of certain rare properties in this ice-cold liquid that I now experienced a rapid transformation from a state of mind and body that was the limit of feebleness to one of almost superhuman strength and capability. Even before the two priests had armed themselves with masses of warm soft towels to dry me I felt myself glowing with health and youth. My brain seemed to clear and expand in some unaccountable way;

I could feel every artery and muscle in my body thrill in joyous unison; to move my limbs was sheer delight. I realised too that my normal height had been increased by some inches, evidently due to the recent painless racking that had caused me to awake prematurely. "This must be the Fountain of Rejuvenation of which d'Aragno spoke," thought I. "I wonder he has never tried a bathe himself in these waters!"

I found an exuberant joy even as I stood thus being rubbed and dried by the priests in the new appearance of myself; I thought of the justice of Vergil's comparison of the glittering young Neoptolemus at the fall of Troy with a snake that has just sloughed his scurfy skin in the warm spring sunshine. I positively quivered with my new-found pride of life. I had cast aside all care and terror; and as to the reflection of having lost the world of my birth, what fresh worlds of adventure were there not ahead of me to conquer or to enjoy in return for the mean, squalid, ungrateful Earth that I had deserted for ever and ever! Had I now been on the Earth itself and not on the planet of Meleager, I felt no doubt but that in a month or so I should be competent to lead an army to victory, or to astonish the House of Commons with a speech whose memory would outlive a generation, or to write a poem or a novel that would last whilst the English tongue endured, or to paint a picture or to mould a statue that would cause Raphael and

Michelangelo to turn in their graves with envy. As Plato once held that the sum of all human knowledge is innate in every man, so I knew at last that the old Greek's axiom was fundamentally correct, but that I alone possessed the hidden key to unlock that chamber of the human brain wherein this mental wealth lies safely stored. I was the Semi-divine; I was the Super-man; I was the new Napoleon alike of the arts of war and peace; I was the latter-day Euphorion, child of beauty, strength and culture.

With this strange new sensation of power pulsing within me, I was suddenly seized with a hot qualm of indignation against those white-robed priests, who had so lately been subjecting my sacred person to a series of manipulations and tortures, and had even more than once dared to thrust my awakening dignity back to the dull chambers of sleep. I quite forgot (though of a truth only for one brief instant) that after all I in my newly acquired pride of strength and intellect was but the creature of these flamens, a mere Frankenstein evoked from a semi-defunct, middle-aged, useless inhabitant of the Earth, who in his agony of failure had voluntarily committed an act of self-effacement. Nevertheless, I turned almost fiercely on my companions, and with an angry wave of my hand bade them turn aside their prying eyes, whilst I completed the act of drying my skin. They obeyed without protest, and a few minutes later one of the priests, still keeping his face

averted, handed me a curious garment which it took me some little time to adjust to my person. It was a thin white woollen article of undress, which completely covered my body, inclusive of arms and legs, like the *chiton* of the ancient Greeks. Its feet moreover were distinguished by a contrivance for keeping the great toes free, in the event of wearing sandals, so I presumed. When I had at length fitted my form into this enveloping garment, whose texture felt deliciously light and warm, the priests once more turned towards me and helped me to don the remaining portions of my attire. These consisted of a pair of buskins of soft dark blue leather that reached half-way to the knee, a tunic of blue cloth with a golden belt, and a flowing cloak of the same rich shade of blue, lined with pale blue silk, that was fastened over the breast with a golden clasp set with a splendid sapphire. Finally I was invited to seat myself in a low chair, whereupon one of the priests proceeded to comb out my hair with a large golden comb. From a burnished metal mirror that was held before me I now realised, to my astonishment, that my hair was of such an inordinate length that some weeks must have elapsed for its growth; it had moreover been bleached, for it was of a pale yellow shade and had a strange silky texture. On the other hand, I may state here that all the hair on the lower portion of my face had been eradicated, nor have I yet had any occasion to use a razor. As a finishing touch, a fillet of blue and gold was

bound round my luxuriant locks, much in the manner one sees depicted on the royal heads of antiquity in coins and medals.

With this last addition my toilet was now complete, and I was bidden to rise. The Arch-priest led the way, and I followed with the two junior priests, one of whom upheld my flowing mantle, whilst the other bore over my head an open state umbrella of blue silk, heavily fringed with gold, and closely resembling the same emblem of state that is used to shelter the Host in processions of the Roman Church. We then traversed several broad gloomy corridors before entering a chamber of considerable size that was lit by flambeaux as well as by lamps of classical form. Here were assembled about a score of young men whose dress closely resembled my own except that its dominant colour was crimson instead of blue. On my appearance all these persons threw themselves prostrate on the floor and remained thus motionless. At this juncture the Arch-priest for the first time addressed me, and his spoken words were in the ancient Latin language. Now I had always possessed an affection and capacity for this tongue, which I have all my life defended from the baseless charge of its being a dead language that is constantly levelled at it by ignorant or prejudiced critics. My proficiency in Latin both at school and at college had been noteworthy, and now, thanks to the reviving effects of my late immersion in those medicated waters, all

my former acquaintance with the Roman tongue was suddenly restored to me. I was thus able to grasp the gist of the Arch-priest's remarks, and my replies through the same medium were more than tolerable, a circumstance that evidently afforded great satisfaction to the old man. I gathered then that this group of youths kneeling before me was composed of the flower of the nobility of Meleager, from whose ranks I was bidden to choose a tutor and two equerries suited to my needs. The Arch-priest further stated that he deemed it preferable for myself to make my own selection in this important matter, for which reason he had devised this plan.

I was quick to perceive that such a privilege must be carefully exercised, so I reflected for a few moments before deciding. I have often flattered myself on being a good judge of human character from the face, and in our world I often fell to speculate on the internal qualities of persons in every station of life that I chanced to meet. Bearing my past observations in mind, I gave a sign for the band before me to arise, and on a word from the Arch-priest the whole line leaped up and stood to attention. Beckoning to one of the priests to hand me a torch, I carefully scrutinised the row of candidates for my favour. Now the youth who stood seventh from the first at once challenged my attention; his countenance showed me that he possessed, consciously or unconsciously, the special qualities I

demanded—fidelity and discretion. Thrice with calm deliberation did I pace up and down that comely company, and on each occasion I felt myself confirmed in my original judgment. I nodded to the Arch-priest, who now handed me a golden rod with which I lightly touched the shoulder of Number Seven. The young man immediately fell at my feet, which he embraced, the while murmuring some words of gratitude in the language of the Meleagrians which of course I did not at that time comprehend. He then rose, and was about to take up a position behind me, when his fellows at once advanced and loaded him with their congratulations on the exceptional mark of honour he had just received. Some of his more intimate friends threw their arms around him, others shook him by the hands, and others again spoke words of encouragement. So far as I could observe, the spirit of jealousy seemed wholly absent. The Arch-priest, who appeared to approve my choice, patted the young man's cheek in a friendly manner, as he told me I had chosen well in Hiridia, for such was his name. Nor have I ever had reason to repent of my selection, for Hiridia has always proved a most faithful friend, and also a well-meaning guide according to his Meleagrian lights, during the whole period of my reign, as I shall relate in due course.

As to the two equerries, whose office would not entail such intimacy, I did not deem it necessary to discriminate so closely amongst this band of noble

applicants, all of whom were doubtless adequate for the purpose. So I simply touched the first and the last of the row standing before me, and these fell out of the line and made me obeisance. This matter concluded, the Arch-priest signified to the remainder to retire, whilst the chosen three tarried behind.

By this time I was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger most acutely, and recollections of my last meal partaken on Earth in the London hotel rose greedily to my mind, as I began to guess how many weeks must have passed since I had eaten. "Your King is hungry and faint for need of food," I remarked in my best Ciceronian Latin to the Arch-priest, who, so I had observed, was now treating me with a degree of deference and even of obsequiousness that he had not shown in the chamber of the fountain. The old man bowed low and long, gave some instructions to Hiridia, whereupon he and I, followed by the two equerries, proceeded to leave the room. Before departing however, the Arch-priest hung a heavy chain of gold round Hiridia's neck, and presented similar chains, but of silver, to his two companions. One of these latter now bore the umbrella of state over my head and the other upheld the cloak, as with Hiridia beside me I prepared to quit the chamber, after I had returned with as much dignity as I could muster the sweeping obeisances of the three priests, who did not offer to accompany us. More corridors were traversed thus, before we finally entered a lofty pillared hall, which

I at once rightly conjectured to be the banqueting chamber of the palace. Here were gathered many men, both young and middle-aged, all wearing clothes similar to those of my three companions, as also a considerable crowd of individuals dressed in short blue tunics and obviously of an inferior social caste. The first were, of course, the members of my Court, all eagerly expecting their new sovereign, whilst the latter were the servants of the household. On my appearance there were deep bows and genuflexions from the nobles assembled, and still lower bows from the menials, the latter raising their left arms to cover their faces, as though the sight of myself were almost too precious or sacred for humbler eyes such as theirs to dwell upon.

I seated myself at a solitary table on a dais, slightly raised above the pavement. The board before me was covered with a coarse linen cloth heavily fringed with blue, whilst the viands were served in a number of glazed white earthenware platters of elegant form, the appointments in general reminding me of meals eaten years ago in old-fashioned hostelries of the Romagna. Of the dinner itself I need not say more than that the meats, though unfamiliar, were quite palatable, as was also the rough red wine which was served abundantly throughout the meal. To my relief I found that knives, spoons and forks were in use, and that the drinking vessels and some of the dishes were of glass. After a dessert of strange but delicious fruits, and

many species of nuts, a crystal goblet of the most elaborate workmanship was set before me and filled with a rather thick sweet red wine, apparently a kind of muscadel. I had sat down ravenous, and in due course I rose from table satisfied, at which movement on my part every person in the room likewise stood erect and remained so standing till I had passed through the doorway.

From the banqueting hall, guided by Hiridia, I proceeded to my sleeping apartment, wherein I found a low square bed of some richly carved dark-coloured wood. A long open gallery occupied one side of this room, and thither I hastened to obtain a glimpse of the outer world. It was a lovely warm starry night, but without moonlight, so that I could only discern my surroundings very dimly. I was able, however, to perceive that this gallery was situated at a considerable height above the sea, whose expanse I could just distinguish in the far distance, and that below me and around me there lay a large city built on steep hillsides descending to the shore. Falling waters made a pleasant murmur in my ears; a faint hum of human activity arose from the city beneath; the shrill cries and chirrups of insects and night birds were clearly audible at intervals. There was nothing unearthly in these darkened surroundings, and yet I knew I stood alone in a fresh world of mystery and wonder, and how vehemently I longed, as I paced that colonnade, for the sun to rise so as to make manifest the scene

that was now all but hidden from my impatient gaze! Hiridia stood beside me, and I think he tried to participate in and sympathise with the thoughts that were agitating my mind, for he often pointed into the gloom and made remarks which were of course, as yet, unintelligible to me. Long did I continue thus to stare and speculate, and indeed it was only out of consideration for poor Hiridia's many yawns and signs of weariness, vainly suppressed, that I finally turned with reluctance from the balcony and prepared for a night's sleep.

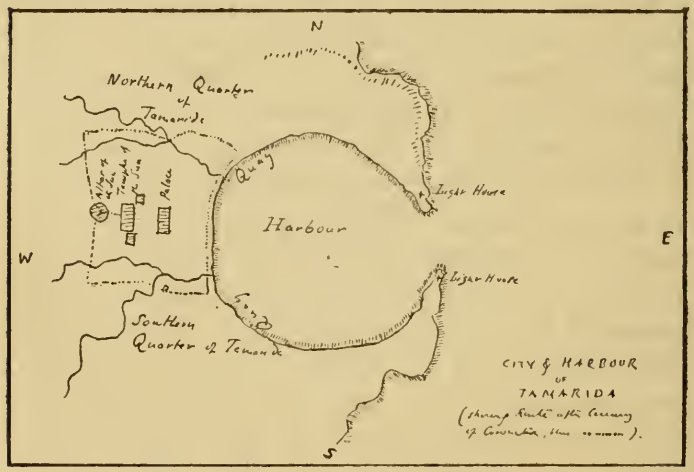
IV

I SLEPT soundly, and was only awakened on hearing, as one does whilst wandering in the misty caverns of dreamland, a strange prolonged noise of peculiar timbre, the last reverberation of which had scarcely died away by the time I was fully conscious and had raised myself in bed. The room was filled with the early light of dawn, and from my pillow I could see beyond the open gallery the splendid disk of the sun's majesty emerge from the distant watery horizon. Hiridia was on his knees muttering prayers with arms extended and face turned towards the sunrise, whilst a servant of the palace, wearing the short blue tunic and blue trousers and blue scarf that constitute the royal livery, was also lying prone on the floor with his head towards the east. Their orisons, if praying they were, were extremely short, for in a trice both men were on their feet and all attention to my wants. I mean to speak later of the minutiæ of my daily life, but at this point I wish to hasten my reader and not to weary or detain him with petty diurnal details that I have settled to describe in another place. Let it suffice to say that I bathed, dressed and breakfasted to my complete satisfaction, and that having duly performed these matutinal duties I was glad to find myself at

leisure to contemplate by the brilliant light of morning the veiled scene of the previous night.

From the vantage ground of my exterior gallery I obtained a superb and intimate view of the great city of Tamarida and its surroundings. Imagine a compound of Naples, Algiers and Amalfi, each of these Mediterranean cities being built on steep slopes descending to the sea-shore, and yet such compound resulting in something totally dissimilar from any earthly town of my acquaintance. In size and arrangement Tamarida somewhat resembled the older portions of Naples that stretch from Sant' Elmo to the Monte di Dio; in setting I was reminded of Amalfi with its craggy headlands, though here on a grander scale; whilst in general character the cascade of dazzling white flat-roofed square houses of the Arab native town in Algiers suggested many points of comparison in this case. But though it was evident that my capital was very extensive, and that much of its area was thickly populated, nevertheless there seemed to be abundance of parks and gardens in all directions, forming oases of vivid greenery amongst the dense masses of small low squat dwellings. Roughly speaking, the city was divided into three portions, that were formed by two deep valleys, down each of which flowed a rapid clear torrent fed from the mountainous regions above. The two outer sections of this curving site were wholly occupied, as I have said, by houses and gardens of the citizens, apparently both rich and

poor intermingled; whilst the central slope between the two streams was reserved for the palace and the main temple and other official buildings. Of these the palace took up a considerable space about half-way up the hillside, and below it, stretching to the harbour, was a large tract of tilth and orchard, well sprinkled with tiny white cottages and long low barns that were presumably used by the labourers



and other servants of the palace. The royal residence itself was an immense rambling structure, built without plan and at various periods, though it was hard to classify its many architectural features or to guess which were the older or more recent portions of the fabric. Above the palace and its adjacent enclosures could be seen hanging-gardens traversed by immense flights of broad shallow steps,

beyond which was another conspicuous group of buildings situated at different levels. This pile I rightly concluded to be the chief—it was the only —temple of the city, both from its more ornate style of architecture and from a circular tower which crowned the main edifice. On this tower upreared a tall column whereon rested a gilded copper representation of the sun in splendour, making a brilliant mass of golden light under the fierce rays of its great original, and offering a prominent landmark for many miles around. Of the residential districts of Tamarida on the two flanking slopes I have omitted to mention that two main streets or arteries for traffic could be distinctly traced by me, running irregularly through the crowded quarters and parks alike, and ending in the broad quays alongside the waters of the harbour. Many ships of various shapes and sizes, but mostly appearing to be fishing vessels, lined these quays and were also visible in numbers on the placid surface of the circular harbour itself, which was contained by two outlying rocky promontories crowned on either tip by a low lighthouse.

I was interrupted in the midst of my many interesting discoveries and observations by the sudden entrance of one of my equerries, who was followed by the Arch-priest demanding an audience. Left alone together, I instinctively put myself on my guard, assuming as well as I could an air of naive simplicity. Despite his deferential words and

attitude, I could not fail to detect the deep-set twinkle in his eye as he proceeded to inform me of the object of his mission. At the same time, however, I felt certain that I must have produced a favourable impression on the previous day, and from my deportment both now and in the future I warmly hoped to be able to hold the old man's approval, for something in my inner consciousness, a species of sixth sense, assured me he was ready to show himself my friend, though doubtless a friend within certain limits that I had yet to learn. The Arch-priest opened our talk with an apology for thus invading the privacy of my apartments without previous warning, excusing himself for his intrusion by the urgent necessity of the occasion. He then informed me that on the next day the ceremony of my coronation was fixed to take place in the temple, which he pointed out to me from the balcony. "You are in the eyes of your subjects, as you know, the Child of the Sun, whom alone we worship in Meleager, and who sends you as a king to rule over his favoured people. You will therefore be presented in public by myself and my colleagues of the Sacred College to the populace; you will be robed and crowned; you will extend your formal blessing to them; you will offer incense at the crystal altar of your Father the Sun, in the great courtyard of the temple; and after that you will mount the sacred white horse so as to ride in full majesty through the streets of the city in the presence of your subjects.

It will be a long and tedious series of ceremonies, yet I flatter myself that each one of these rites will not be without interest to you, seeing the lengthy spell of authority amongst us that lies ahead of you. I myself shall be at your side throughout, and you may rely with safety on my tutelage in any event."

Other advice and suggestions the Arch-priest likewise imparted to me, amongst the rest that Hiridia would in course of time teach me the spoken language of Meleager. "Ever since your immersion in the mystical well," so my companion proceeded, "you will experience an acceleration of all the faculties, which in your case were already highly developed when on Earth. Moreover, the tongue of the Meleagrians, which under Hiridia's teaching you will soon acquire, is not a written language, and none outside our hierarchy of the Temple of the Sun can read or write at all. Indeed, our only archives are in Latin, since for reasons which it is not expedient for me to mention at this point we have always vigorously opposed the casting of the popular speech into a literary form." This last statement the old man made in a very solemn manner, looking me full in the face as though to catch any motion or expression of surprise or disapproval. But I had set my countenance unflinchingly, and received his confidences with perfect outward composure, whereupon the Arch-priest leaned back in his chair with a faint sigh of relief which by no means escaped my watchful notice. Having received this minor

secret of Meleagrian state craft so calmly and suitably, I was hoping to glean yet more information on the traditional polity of the governing cabal of my kingdom, but on this occasion I was doomed to be disappointed. For the Arch-priest arose abruptly, and leading me to the balustrade of the gallery began to point out and explain to me the various buildings and salient features that were discernible from this spot. In most cases I found I had already guessed correctly, my intelligence and perspicacity evidently serving to strengthen the favourable impression I had already created. The Arch-priest then led me to the other side of the building and introduced me to the private gardens of the palace, a delightful pleasance, full of sub-tropical verdure and flowers and overshadowed by tall palms and cypresses. Fountains with marble basins were frequent, and their constant plashing made an agreeable sound in the intense quiet of this retreat. I noted too that every fountain was circular in shape, and that everywhere were to be seen endless representations of the sun, whilst the many lackeys or slaves attached to the royal service bore the same design woven in gold and blue on their breasts. Returning to the gallery overlooking the town and harbour, my companion bade me listen to the hum of voices and the din of traffic that rose from below into the warm air, striking on my ears with the mingled sounds of a teeming city.

"Tamarida is filled to overflowing with your loyal

subjects," commented the Arch-priest; "who are all agog to behold to-morrow's function; and even now the town is hourly receiving innumerable visitors from the country districts and from your Majesty's second city of Zapyro, which is ever jealous of the capital for its possession of the person of the Child of the Sun." He paused for a moment to give me another of those arch glances from his kindly, humorous old eyes; but I only nodded and smiled amiably. "Thousands of faithful citizens too from your Majesty's colonies on the wild rocky coasts of Barbaria yonder to the north (and he waved his arm to indicate some distant land beyond the enclosing hills) are hastening hither to behold the reincarnation of the Child of the Sun, concerning whom their parents have doubtless told them wonderful tales. See those boats with bellying sails that are even now entering the harbour's mouth; they are all freighted with excited pilgrims, men, women and children, drawn hither to assist at a spectacle of outward splendour and interior sanctity that your Earth, notwithstanding its illimitable wealth and its superior population, cannot produce. They tell me (and here the old man's eyes again twinkled mischievously) that one of your own many religious cults is ruled by a priest who claims and receives divine honours. He is said to be elected by a college of saintly and venerable brother priests, and to be borne aloft with pomp and acclamation on the shoulders of men of noble

birth. I have, of course, never seen the ceremonies of modern Rome (which city I hold in especial esteem as having been in ancient times the origin of our official written language), but in this one crucial instance this consecration of an earthly high priest must yield to ours. For there is (so I am informed) no unanimity of opinion, no universal acceptance of the chosen pontiff; whilst here the King who is provided by our hierarchy is acknowledged by all without hesitation or limit as the connecting link between the divine and the human, whose presence is absolutely essential to the welfare of his subjects. Our King is the peculiar guerdon of our sole Deity the Sun to his favoured people, on whom from time to time he deigns to bestow a member of his own family for guidance and example."

At length the Arch-priest took his departure, and I spent the remainder of the day agreeably enough in the society of Hiridia, whom I set to teach me the names of every object in sight. I had already requested the Arch-priest for pen and ink and paper, and after a visible tendency to demur he had yielded to my demand, a plentiful supply of beautifully prepared rolls of vellum, an ink-horn and some quill pens being brought me. I now wrote down phonetically the name of each thing supplied me by Hiridia, placing its English equivalent opposite. I was quite astonished at my progress in the course of a few hours' application of this nature, and the sun was

low in the western sky when my patient tutor made respectful signs to me to rise and follow him. I soon grasped his intention, for he led me through the gardens to an open court where two young nobles were playing at some sort of hand-ball. A slave now removed my mantle and tunic, to exchange them for a short linen garment, whilst a pair of hard leather gloves were likewise supplied me. We four now fell to play with zest a game that was so reminiscent of the hand-fives of my school-days that I learned the science, the rules and the method of scoring in a very short space. I thoroughly enjoyed the healthy exercise, which in due course produced a copious perspiration, and thus we amused ourselves till the final sinking of the sun brought our game to a close for lack of light. At this moment I heard the prolonged blare of a distant trumpet, and straightway perceived my three companions sink to their knees for a short but silent prayer. Then they rose and led me to the thermal baths attached to the palace, where I indulged in a further bout of sweating followed by a plunge in cool water. After resting I dressed myself again, and with an excellent appetite made my way to the banqueting hall, where I partook of the last meal of the day. On this occasion a band of professional players with unfamiliar instruments provided us with music, which I found neither better nor worse than many of the concerts I had been obliged to attend at various times upon Earth. Pleasantly fatigued,

at last I sought my bed-chamber to ponder over my late experiences of the first twenty-four conscious hours I had spent on the planet of Meleager.

Early on the following morning there were abundant signs to warn me of the great impending event. All was bustle and animation within the palace, and at an early hour the Arch-priest himself was announced to give me some final instructions. Soon afterwards a litter was brought, borne by a number of servants dressed in what was evidently their gala livery, and in this equipage I was placed, behind carefully closed curtains, and was thus conveyed up many long flights of steps to the precincts of the temple above. Here on my arrival I found the Arch-priest and several members of the hierarchy awaiting me, and was informed that first of all it was necessary for me to hold a levée of the whole of the ruling Council of the Seventy. I cannot say that this prospect afforded me any pleasure; still, I prepared to comport myself with the necessary amount of calm dignity I deemed fitting for the occasion. I was next ushered into a large hall, where in a semicircle were seated a large number of these all-powerful patriarchs clad in their robes of flowing white. I was directed to a throne opposite them, and at once began to hold my formal reception, each member of the Council being presented to me in turn by the Arch-priest. In every case, mindful of our royal Court procedure on Earth,

I proffered my right hand for a kiss of salutation, and at the same time set my face to exhibit no sign of anxiety or self-consciousness, for I realised that I was amongst the keenest and most critical intellects of the kingdom, who regarded me not in the light of a true monarch, but rather as their own creature, a thing raised by their choice and efforts from mere nothingness to a position of extreme though false magnificence. Nevertheless, I was not so much preoccupied with the mastery of my feelings that I failed to note carefully the face and expression of each individual member as the councillors filed before me in a long moving stream that seemed to flow interminably past the throne, so prolix and lengthy was the Arch-priest in his style of presentation. Vainly did I look for the appearance of my Herthian friend Signor Arrigo d'Aragno amongst their number, but either he was absent or else was so skilfully disguised that I failed to detect his presence. One little circumstance I observed was that whereas all the Meleagrian men I had hitherto seen wore moustaches, these grandees of the governing caste were all either clean-shaven or else owned beards of an imposing length. Nearly two hours were consumed in this fatiguing occupation, and thankful I was when the last sharp-eyed senator had returned to his seat.

I now arose of my own motion, and expressed a desire to quit the chamber of the councillors, whose atmosphere somehow oppressed and irritated me.

The Arch-priest accordingly led me into a closet adjoining, where I sate down on the pretence of fatigue. Ere long however to my relief I saw Hiridia approach, followed by my two equerries and by some servants of the palace bearing large bundles, which I perceived contained the regal robes of state. A priest certainly stood beside me, but he made no attempt to interfere with Hiridia's arrangements. First of all, I was stripped to my inner vesture, after which gorgeous blue leather buskins with heavy gold tassels and laces were fitted to my feet. Next a tunic far more elaborate than my usual one was donned; then a mantle of an appalling weight but of a surpassing splendour was hung from my yielding shoulders. On the mantle itself was embroidered a device of the blazing sun in heavy gold thread, whilst the rest of the surface of the cloak was thickly patined with golden stars. The mantle was fastened by a clasp composed of a huge cabochon sapphire of perfect water set in a circle of flashing diamonds. At this moment the Arch-priest returned, resplendent in festal robes of white silk fringed with gold and with a tall golden mitre on his head. Thus habited, he appeared a striking and venerable figure, for his superior height, his flowing white beard, his pleasant brown eyes and his delicate complexion all combined to make a most favourable impression on the beholder. On a cushion he carried the regal crown, of the type known to heraldry as " palisaded," and

not unlike the diadem worn by the Medicean Grand Dukes of Tuscany, as shown in their pictures and effigies. My crown was all of gold with the exception of one large oval sapphire surrounded by brilliants for its central ornament. This object the Arch-priest now carefully placed on my head, not a little to my trepidation until I realised that, whether by accident or as the result of forethought, the heavy circle fitted my cranium to a nicety. The finishing touch consisted in fastening solid gold *armillæ*, or bracelets, set with sapphires on my wrists.

Thus gloriously apparelled, I must on standing up have presented a truly noble and imposing appearance, and I say so without shame of conceit or vanity. I was many inches taller than the tallest of my companions; thanks to my bath in the Fountain of Rejuvenation I had a clear white skin, a sparkling eye, and an elegance of carriage that have rarely been seen by mortal man; whilst the extreme fairness of my complexion and the sheen of my long locks in contrast with so many dusky skins and black heads of hair seemed to attract to themselves some kind of shadowy semi-divine aureole, such as Benvenuto Cellini describes as investing his person after his colloquy with the Blessed Virgin and St Peter in his cell of the castle of Sant'Angelo. I was well aware of the sensation I aroused in all present, even in the Arch-priest; and a thrill of elation, of confidence in the future, possessed me through and through. Whether or no these

saturnine priests of the Temple of the Sun chose to regard me as their puppet, their slave, what was that to me? I realised that my marvellous beauty at this moment was an asset whereof nothing they could say or do would lessen my influence in the eyes of the mass of the people I was about to face. All misgivings and tremors left me, as I prepared boldly to move forward and take my part in the coming pageant.

To a terrific blast of trumpets and to the explosions of some antiquated-looking mortars that stood on the temple parapet, our procession filed through a narrow doorway on to a broad marble platform. First emerged the nobles attached to the Court in their crimson gala robes, then the priests, a long sinuous line of snowy white; behind them walked the Arch-priest, whilst last of all appeared myself, a tall commanding majestic figure with my equerries to uphold my glittering mantle. My entry into sight of the vast multitude that thronged the courtyard below the platform on which we stood was first greeted by a spell of perfect silence, which in time changed to a long low murmur of approval and awe, and finally to a resounding roar of satisfied delight. Slowly did our long train of nobles, priests, choristers and attendants unwind and fall into proper groups in their assigned places, the whole scene reminding me of some wonderful ballet on an immense stage, with its blending and massing and dividing of the colours of white, red,

gold and blue, like the intricate movements of some stately dance.

At last only the Arch-priest and myself remained standing in the central space of the platform, when the former, after an obeisance of a cringing humility of which I had hitherto deemed him incapable, conducted me to a throne beneath a canopy of blue and gold. From this point, during the performance of some singing, I was enabled surreptitiously to examine the component parts of the huge crowd beneath. Immediately under the dais were numbers of persons who were all characterised by wearing green in some form or other, either green tunics or mantles or scarves. As these seemed to occupy the better and reserved space in the courtyard I concluded (and rightly so) that they were members of the middle or mercantile class, who were given precedence over the general populace. The latter were farther away, and were consequently more difficult for me to distinguish. But it was a picturesque throng in any case, and brilliantly coloured, for the robes were mostly in tints of yellow, orange, violet, pink, cinnamon and other shades, though the four colours of blue, white, red and green were conspicuously absent. Men, women and children were visible in the crowd, all of them being small dark people of the type already exemplified in the few persons I had hitherto seen. Part of the court was enclosed by double colonnades that supported upper chambers screened by lattice-

work from inquisitive eyes, like the discreet convent windows I used to observe in the highest storeys above the streets of Naples and Palermo. Behind these screens were evidently many spectators, and from the shrillness of the voices issuing hence and from other indications I gathered that the occupants of these galleries were mostly women. As a matter of fact, one side was reserved for the ladies and children of the nobility, and the other for the female inmates of the college of nuns or recluses attached to the Temple of the Sun, of whose duties I mean to speak later.

After a long interval of chanting, at a sign from the Arch-priest I rose and gave a benediction to the assembled crowd by raising my right arm and slowly turning round so as to envisage the whole assembly. This was made the excuse for more applause, and when this had subsided more canticles were intoned. Again I imparted the required blessing, after which a golden censer was brought me and I was assisted to advance towards a small altar, formed apparently of solid crystal, whereon the sun's rays were falling in blinding coruscations of light. Here I offered up clouds of incense in the direction of my supposed Parent, the whole multitude kneeling in the most profound silence and in the most decorous attitude of rapt attention. For fully ten minutes I must have been swaying that heavy censer, and what with the weight of my robes, the scorching heat of the sun's beams, and the

extreme tension caused by the magnificence and novelty of my situation, I felt almost at last ready to drop from sheer exhaustion, when the Arch-priest again came to my rescue and relieved me of the smoking thurible. More cheering, more intoning, more ceremonious movements, till ultimately I found myself with the Arch-priest on one side of me and Hiridia on the other, making my way off the platform. I was forthwith led to a chamber furnished with long tables whereon was served a collation of which I stood considerably in need. I then learned I was being entertained thus by the body of the hierarchy, so that once more I felt the necessity of exhibiting no sign of fatigue or of astonishment. The meal was of brief duration, for the day was well advanced by this time, and there still remained the important state entry and procession through the streets of the capital. Quitting the temple precincts I found a cavalcade, or guard of honour, awaiting me, whilst some pages were holding a horse in readiness for me. My steed of state was of a remarkable aspect, for he was pure white with a strong tint of flesh pink showing through his coat, and with pink ears and muzzle. His flowing mane and tail had also been dyed of a blue colour, and, most marvellous thing of all, his eyes showed of a clear light blue. Afterwards I learned that this animal belonged to a breed that is specially reserved for the use of the Child of the Sun on state occasions, and that certain families

possess hereditary rights in connection with the breeding and training of these uncanny quadrupeds. With a saddle and bridle of blue leather richly ornamented with gold this white stallion stood ready caparisoned for my person, and with some assistance owing to the weight of my cloak I managed to mount without conscious loss of dignity. My long mantle with its gorgeous devices was deftly spread over the horse's back; my feet were fixed in the clumsy bucket-like stirrups, and the reins placed in my hand. Thus seated, with Hiridia and other nobles walking beside me, I was ready to start, whereupon my mounted escort in their picturesque chain-armour led the way with a clanking sound.

Leaving the temple gates we soon crossed a bridge spanning a rushing river whose precipitous banks were thickly clothed with rich vegetation of palm ferns, poinsettias and other tropical plants. Pursuing our course we turned sharply to the right, whereupon I almost immediately found myself in the streets of the capital with the prospect of descending a very narrow steep paved roadway that led eventually to the beach below. The streets themselves being too narrow to permit of the presence of spectators, every window and flat house-roof, and indeed every possible coign of vantage, was occupied by the citizens of Tamarida, who all evinced the liveliest enthusiasm in thus beholding their new sovereign in his progress. Much to my relief my horse contrived to pick his way without mishap

down that fearful lane, which now and again broke into actual steps, like the dingy mediæval streets of old Naples. Every second I was dreading a stumble on the part of my queer-coloured steed, and a consequent loss of majesty to myself; each moment I feared for the fate of my weighty diadem. Mechanically I continued to smile and to scatter benisons upon the vociferous crowds of loyal subjects, the while I trusted to my own good luck as well as to Hiridia's careful guidance; and it was with a sense of unspeakable gratitude that eventually I reached the water-side that was lined with shipping of which every yard-arm was positively bristling with eager brown humanity. For some little distance we now pursued the curved line of the shore, and then crossing another archway entered a gate opening into the lower portion of the palace gardens. Here a large number of servants, gardeners and labourers, with their families, was drawn up to cheer and to prostrate themselves before me, and I concluded my ride had drawn to an end. But it was not so, for I had to cross the gardens and by means of another bridge or viaduct to enter the southern quarter of the city and to repeat my previous experience, with the important difference that this time I had to ascend instead of descend the long narrow winding streets. This at any rate was an improvement on my former trial, and I carried it through with apparent unconcern, although it seemed an interminable time before I was finally quit of the crowds

and the streets and was once more on my feet and in the purlieus of the palace. Thus did I accomplish successfully the not inconsiderable task allotted me on my second day in Meleager, and albeit hot and exhausted by my exertions, I flattered myself internally that I had borne the long ordeal of my coronation ceremonies with distinction.

It was almost dark when I dismounted from my peculiar but trustworthy palfrey, to seek the peace and privacy of my bed-chamber, where I was assisted to unrobe. A warm bath and a cool plunge soon refreshed me, so that I felt capable of facing any further demands on my bodily or mental strength that might be required of me that night. There was a grand banquet with music and some display of dancing and conjuring, but nothing more occurred of special interest, though I was glad to observe and feel that I had won the warm approval of the nobles of the Court, who sat feasting round me. Thus ended my coronation day, and right glad I was to retire to my bed and to sleep off the fatigue and excitement of its many strange incidents.

I trust I have not wearied or disgusted the reader with my lengthy account of all these events that took place during the first two days of my reign in Meleager. Portions of what I have thus described will, I fear, seem somewhat disjointed and obscure, but in excuse I can plead that so did they also seem disjointed and obscure to myself at the time, for at this early stage I had naturally learned next to

nothing of the peculiar conditions prevailing in my new kingdom. These I intend to treat of in my subsequent chapters, whereby I hope to throw some light on my own anomalous position as a semi-divine monarch, on the composition and aims of the hierarchy, on the social status of the various classes composing the realm, and on the daily life of myself and of my people.

V

At this very early stage I had naturally not acquired the native language of Meleager, and my sole communication was carried on with the Arch-priest in a classical tongue. Besides this, apart from the restricted nature of our intercourse, it was tolerably clear to me that the members of the hierarchy as a whole showed themselves anxious to suppress rather than to explain to me their guiding principles of polity. With this impression firmly fixed in my mind, I became more than ever eager and determined to learn the native language with all speed, so that for the next few weeks I abandoned myself with the greatest diligence to this object. What with my sharpened wits and with my close application I made unexpectedly rapid progress; nor should I omit to pay my tribute of gratitude to Hiridia's pains and patience in this matter. For many hours daily we engaged in our task, and, with the exception of taking the exercise necessary for health, practically all my working time was occupied in linguistic efforts. My toil was well rewarded, for after no very great length of time I had the satisfaction of perceiving that daily I grew more and more proficient in my subject, so that I was able to

converse with Hiridia with some degree of fluency and mutual understanding.

This interval of vigorous study must have lasted about three months in all, and in spite of many hints from the Arch-priest I firmly refused to leave the precincts of the palace until I had gained the mastery of the native tongue. As to whether this attitude of close seclusion caused disappointment in the capital or annoyance among the members of the council I paid no heed, but only showed my inflexible resolution on this head. Having once succeeded completely in my design, I made every effort to draw from Hiridia all conceivable information about the land and people I had been called upon to rule, my questions ranging over the whole field of possible inquiry. I certainly did in this way contrive to amass a certain amount of valuable knowledge, although I was by no means satisfied with all the answers and explanations I received. For, if it was plain that the Arch-priest and his colleagues were averse to supplying the required details, it was equally plain that poor Hiridia with all the good intentions possible was excessively ignorant of his own surroundings; for instance, he could tell me next to nothing of the mode of life, the general conditions and the interior affairs of any class of the realm save that of the nobility to which he himself belonged. As to the hierarchy, on which subject I plied him with the greatest tact, I had to conclude that, whilst regarding the ruling caste

with unmeasured awe and respect, he was at the same time in nowise intimate with any of that elusive body, though its members were drawn solely from his own class and were in some cases his own relations. Thus was I compelled to build my edifice of knowledge and discovery of bricks without straw, so that often I was fain to lose my temper in my fruitless endeavours to attain the truth; happily, however, my patience and perseverance triumphed over my natural exasperation. Daily I made careful notes in English on my parchment, altering or adding to these notes from time to time, as further inquiry or observation served to throw more light on the main subject of my study. And it always amused me to observe the look of profound admiration, even of alarm, wherewith Hiridia used to regard the cabalistic scrolls I daily annotated on my table, which stood in the long gallery facing the sea. At the same time I grew to learn that my tutor's reverence was mingled with an intense feeling of loyalty and devotion to myself, so that I instinctively knew that his life would be willingly risked in my service, should any evil chance arise. Thus my reputation of semi-divinity in this instance certainly carried some advantages with it! As to the Arch-priest, who always insisted on speaking in Latin to me, I did not indeed look for the same unwavering fidelity as I found in Hiridia, yet with that curious extra sixth sense of mine, that is never at fault, I knew he was pleased with my

painstaking efforts, and that he was for the present at least very much my sincere friend and champion.

I think I had better at this point in my narrative offer a brief description of the average day that I spend, so as to afford the reader some notion of my duties, my pleasures and my occupations—that is, of course, after I had succeeded in mastering the language of my kingdom. The course of time being reckoned in Meleager after the old Italian mode of counting the twenty-four hours from the uprising of the sun, at the first streak of dawn watchers in the temple proclaim the new-born day, by firing a piece of ordnance. This is succeeded by loud trumpet calls in the barracks of the soldiery, and the whole city awakens. Every one leaps from bed, and kneeling repeats the following short prayer to the Sun:

"O Sun, mighty King, Father of Lights, I bless thee and thank thee for another day! It is Thou alone that canst gladden our hearts, warm our homes, nourish our crops, sweeten our grass, ripen our fruits. By Thy Light alone Thy servants can live and adore Thee. Blessed be Thy Face once more appearing!"

This simple formula is the universal morning prayer on Meleager, whose inhabitants are true sun-worshippers, in the sense tbat they attribute all good and all gifts to the sun's visible power and

majesty that are daily revealed to them. As for myself, however, being deemed the Child of the Sun, I do not consider it incumbent on me to indulge in this matutinal act of worship, though each dawn I wake to see my servant lying prostrate on the floor with face turned reverently towards the east. The act of prayer performed, he approaches my couch with a goblet filled with some sort of mineral water of a slightly bitter flavour, that is invariably swallowed before arising. I then have a rather perfunctory bath in an adjoining room, submitting myself to a rapid ablution with water slightly perfumed with verbena, a scent that is reserved exclusively for the royal use. I dress in the manner previously described, and am then ready for my breakfast, which is usually set out in the open gallery that is already flooded by the warm early sunlight. My repast consists of coffee (which is extensively cultivated here), together with thick cream, a manchet of fine white bread, and a platter heaped with superb fruit. I leisurely enjoy these dainties and then (what on my first acquaintance afforded me equal pleasure and surprise) I proceed to smoke a cigar, or large cigarette, consisting of coarse granular tobacco rolled in maize leaf, like the type of cigarette affected by the natives of Brazil. For tobacco is largely grown here, and its leaves are put to many uses, including this last-mentioned agreeable purpose.

Whilst I am enjoying my fragrant cigarette,

Hiridia invariably appears, bringing me the news of the day, and thus conversing we soon stroll into the gardens that are still fresh and gleaming with the dew. As I stand about six feet three inches, and perhaps a trifle more, and my tutor is of the average Meleagrian height of five foot five inches, I used at first to find our walks on the terrace rendered unsatisfactory by reason of our disparity in stature. To remedy this, I have caused a low platform of stone to be constructed the whole of its length some ten inches above the ground, and along this erection Hiridia now walks beside me so that we can chat at a convenient level. I thought the Arch-priest rather inclined to boggle at this suggestion, but I contrived to carry my point all the same.

At the third hour of the day begins my work. First of all I hold an audience, which is attended by the Arch-priest and some other members of the hierarchy, whereat various matters of state concerning the needs of the community, or the colonies, or the troops are broached and discussed. An hour or more is generally exhausted in this business, and by the fourth hour or a little later I issue from the palace with a military escort and shadowed by the umbrella of state to the judgment hall of the people, which is situated in the city itself. (Or rather, to be quite explicit, I visit thus the two courts of the northern and southern quarters of Tamarida on alternate mornings.) Here I take my seat on a dais, and dispense justice and advice to all and

sundry in a fashion that constantly reminds me of the multitudinous duties of a London stipendiary magistrate, though the conditions of the two cases are happily very diverse. My suppliants are drawn almost wholly from the lowest estate of the realm, and sometimes the points submitted to my judgment are of the most trivial character. But I sit and listen with all the patience I can command, and then announce my verdict with all the care and circumspection whereof I am capable. It is pathetic to observe the intense faith my people have in my decisions; a suitor who has lost his plea may perhaps feel disappointment, but he is obviously fully resigned to my judgment, and accepts my award as absolutely just and final. In short, the popular confidence in my wisdom and sense of equity is unbounded, as the large and ever-increasing roll of my daily petitioners can testify.

At noon a discharge of cannon, such as one still hears in the large Italian cities at midday, resounds through the air, and the business of the court is hurried to a conclusion. Everyone now retires to dine and sleep, for at least two hours' space of rest is allotted to the whole community. I return to the palace with my escort, quite ready for my midday meal, which usually consists of eggs, fish, bread and fruit, with plenty of the rough red or white Meleagrian wine, that is both palatable and wholesome. To this repast I am in the habit of inviting various members of the nobility, and

I always find these small informal parties far preferable to the rather dreary public supper of the Court, which takes place each evening soon after sundown. After eating, I sometimes play at chess (which is a very popular game here) with one of my invited friends, whilst my other guests amuse themselves as best they may; or at other times I listen to tales or poems recited by such as aspire to become distinguished in this department of Meleagrian social life. About the ninth or tenth hour I walk in the gardens, and after that I change my clothes so as to enjoy a vigorous game of hand-ball, which usually lasts till dusk. After my exercise follows the bath, a lengthy but delightful daily experience, for after the usual sweating and course of rubbing in the heated chambers, one can plunge into a deep basin of cool water. This pool also contains a cascade of artificial construction that one shoots, in the manner employed by some of the islanders of the South Seas, the bather being hurled over the falling volume of water into another deep pool below. By swimming rapidly for a few strokes beneath the surface one emerges farther on in the calm clear water of a large natural basin that is fringed with ferns and verdure. A rapid stream flowing down from the mountain-tops above through a precipitous channel has at some time or other been cleverly utilised in the construction of this cataract and lower pool, which have been incorporated in these bathing arrangements for the

palace. Afterwards, I rest a while before dressing, when I proceed at my own convenience to the large banqueting hall, though not before a salvo of trumpets has given the signal that the workaday phase of Meleagrian daily life is ended. All toil save that of domestic service now ceases, and the whole city of Tamarida willingly resigns itself to rest and recreation until the morrow's dawn. At the evening meal eaten in public I remain but a short time, and then retire to my own apartments, whither I summon, if so disposed, such persons as I feel inclined to honour with an interview. Often however I sit or pace alone for hours in the darkened or moonlit solitude of my loggia, meditating on my strange fate and concocting plans for my future course of conduct.

Such is the outline of my average day, but this programme is often varied. In the first place, every seventh day being a public day of thanksgiving and rest from labour, I have to attend the necessary ceremonies in the temple instead of holding my informal court in the city. On these days, too, I usually ride afield with some of my courtiers, generally to go hunting into the wild mountainous region behind the temple, where the keen air and the wide views over sea and land seem to freshen my body and my spirits. Occasionally I pay a visit on horseback to the seat of some hospitable nobleman, whence we return late at night. At other times I honour some country

village with my presence, much to the delight and surprise of its inhabitants. There are no books, as I have already explained, so that in reality my life is necessarily compounded of action and meditation, which on the whole has not hitherto caused me weariness or disgust. Whether or no I shall always rest thus contented with this monotonous routine of splendour and duty is a disagreeable and anxious question that I try, with only moderate success, to thrust into the background of my thoughts.

VI

Not a day passes here but that I lament my crass ignorance of even the elementary principles of astronomy. In my school-days I was never taught the use of the celestial globe, though my young brains were burdened with the problems and theorems of Euclid, with Greek enclitics and other scholastic lumber, dear to the dry-as-dust soul of the English pedagogue. Such books dealing with the heavens as I chanced to read in later life failed to leave an abiding impression on my adult mind, with the result that now I can only bewail uselessly the gaps in my early education. I mention this defect for a special reason—namely, to crave allowance for the tentative character and amateurish account of the features of my planet, which I want to present to the reader.

From such calculations as I have made for myself and by myself I believe the planet of Meleager to be insignificant in comparison with the Earth. Possibly I may be mistaken in stating that its whole surface is barely equal to the area of Australia, yet that is my opinion. Its climate is subtropical in the central zone, gradually tapering to temperate and cold towards its poles. Roughly speaking, the "Regio Solis," the spreading peninsula that forms

the main portion of the kingdom of the Child of the Sun, possesses the climate of Egypt or Mexico. Its summers are long and warm, though never disagreeably torrid; its winter is of brief duration and normally wet rather than cold, snow rarely falling near the coast. The changes of spring and autumn are little marked, so that the whole course of the year seems to consist of an extended warm season followed by a spell of wet and cold. Southward of the Region of the Sun there extends an apparently trackless ocean, on whose waters, I am told, there is no land visible save a few barren islets and rocky reefs. But then exploration for exploration's sake is wholly alien to the Meleagrian outlook, and I much doubt whether the light sailing vessels of the fishermen (who alone tempt these southern seas) have penetrated very far in this direction, especially in face of the storms that are apt to arise without warning in this quarter and are consequently much dreaded by mariners. The ensuing little sketch map according to Mercator's projection, though very rough and imperfect, may perhaps afford the reader some idea of the lands and seas of Meleager, as I conceive them to exist.

It will be observed that the capital lies, presumably of intention, exactly on the line of the Equator and that it faces due east; whilst Zapyro, the second city of the realm, is also situated in the same latitude but looking towards the west. The whole coast-line of the Regio Solis is much indented, and it forms a

pendent peninsula to the large partially unexplored region to the north, which I always speak of as Barbaria, though it is commonly known merely as the North Land. Of the size of the main kingdom I am uncertain; at times I conceive it to be as large as Great Britain, at other times I think it can be hardly more extensive than Ireland. The centre of

the kingdom is largely covered by mountain ranges and elevated plateaux. None of these mountains however are of any great height, with the sole exception of a tall isolated rocky peak in the promontory north of Tamarida, from which it is clearly visible. This conspicuous cloven peak I have named Mount Crystal on account of its shining crags, but it is known to the Meleagrians as the Altar of the Sun, and it is obviously invested in popular belief with many mystical attributes. Below the

summit, which at a mere guess I should say was about seven thousand of our feet above sea-level, I can clearly distinguish a group of buildings on a narrow ledge to eastward; and Hiridia has told me that these belong to a temple of peculiar sanctity which none save the priests and their trusted servants are ever permitted to enter, or even to approach. Naturally I often speculate as to the uses of this lofty and jealously guarded shrine, and I have come to the conclusion that here are preserved the paraphernalia necessary to the due working of the details of The Secret. Be that as it may, the solitary mountain and its mysterious temple form a prominent feature in all the eastern portion of the kingdom.

All round the coast the soil is intensely fertile, and produces food in abundance for the whole population, which is nowhere very dense save in the two large cities. These two are in fact the only towns of any size in the whole peninsula, with the exception of Fúfani, situated at the head of a broad inlet of the southern coast. These southern shores are mostly rocky with huge beetling cliffs that recall the iron-bound shores of Capri and Cornwall. Against this natural barrier the raging billows in vain hurl themselves, and as I have stood watching the storm-vexed waters from these heights, I have often been reminded of the sounding seas and foam-flecked waves I once delighted to gaze upon from the heads of Sydney harbour that oppose the whole fury of the Pacific. The northern coasts of the

Region of the Sun are less romantic, and in many places the coastal zone is marked by long stretches of sand with marshes behind them. Everywhere the vegetation both of cultivated and of wild growth exhibits a close resemblance to and an evident affinity with the flora of the Earth. In fact, there appear such endless points of similarity between the natural features of Meleager and of the Earth that I have often found it difficult to realise I was not living in some hitherto undiscovered corner of my native sphere. Appreciating the vast depths of my own ignorance in all matters scientific, I declare with trepidation yet with a firm sense of conviction that the geological history and development of the two planets must have been practically identical.

Not far from Zapyro begins the long isthmus that connects the warm subtropical Region of the Sun with the great half-explored territory of the north, or Barbaria. This large tract of land is said to widen out to northward, but very little is known of its interior, which at no great distance from the coast-line is blocked by a long chain of tall mountains, many of whose rugged peaks are covered with eternal snow. Large lakes and swamps are commonly reported to lie beyond these ranges, but in reality next to nothing is known of the country sheltered behind this great natural barrier. As I have already stated, the average Meleagrian has no taste for pioneering enterprise, so he remains quite satisfied with the tales of more intrepid hunters

who have penetrated thus far and speak vaguely of a barren soil, of dismal morasses and of uncouth aborigines whose manners are fully as repellent as is the aspect of the lands they inhabit. Equally the coasts of Barbaria have been little examined, except those of the Great Northern Bay and the stretch of shore running north-west of Zapyro. All this coast-line is however sprinkled with stray colonies of South Meleagrians, some of these settlements being of a permanent character, whilst others are merely occupied as temporary bases for fishing or hunting. There are also a few colonies inland to the south of the mountains, but though the whole of this district is inhabited, no systematic occupation of this warmer portion of Barbaria has ever been attempted. The colonists for the most part consist of emigrants belonging to the people, but not a few of the nobles own estates whereon they breed cattle and sheep, or utilise for growing large timber. Some marble and stone quarries are likewise worked, but all these mercantile projects are evidently carried on in a distinctly haphazard style. All the permanent inhabitants of this region are subjects of my kingdom, yet they are not all of pure blood, but must in the remote past have intermingled with the original stock of this territory, who may perhaps have belonged to the same race as the yellow-skinned prognathous tribesmen who still dwell in the unexplored and unannexed portions of Barbaria beyond the mountains. In any case,

these natives of South Barbaria are fine, strong-featured people, though easily distinguishable from those of the Region of the Sun. Many men of this district travel southward to enlist as soldiers, for which their more hardy physique admirably suits them, or else to offer themselves as indentured labourers and servants for a term of years. Two members of the hierarchy are charged specially with the interests of this class of temporary immigrant, and, so far as I could ascertain, they are always treated with fairness and consideration, though they are somewhat despised by the ruling populace of the south.

I have been informed that in times past these South Barbarians have actually attempted to invade the Region of the Sun, and in proof of this tradition I noted that the isthmus near Zapyro is fortified by a military wall running across its whole breadth from sea to sea. These old fortifications are solidly built, and are still kept in admirable repair, whilst one of the regiments is always quartered here in permanent barracks. There seems however, at the present time, to be little fear or probability of a repetition of any such incursion in spite of the constant guard maintained on the isthmus.

Of the capital I have already spoken, and of its picturesque situation on the hillsides sloping to the waters of the broad deep harbour whose circular form hints at a remote volcanic origin. Owing to the absence of towers and lofty buildings the whole town wears an Oriental aspect, for the Meleagrian

style of architecture strongly inclines to colonnades, low domes and flat roofs. The streets are dark and narrow, a perfect labyrinth of paved lanes, but they are kept scrupulously clean by means of an excellent system of scavenging, whilst the copious use of disinfectant liquids renders them wholesome, so that Tamarida is remarkably free from disease in all forms. The houses own little external ornament, and being all whitewashed recall the Arab quarters of Algiers and Tunis. This similarity is increased by the nature of their internal arrangements, which contain courtyards, or *patios*, open to the sky, these spaces in the case of the richer citizens being embellished with fountains and flower-beds. A happy combination of the dwellings of the classical world as still visible at Rome or Pompeii and the architecture of Islam may best describe the type of home prevailing in Tamarida and elsewhere throughout the kingdom. The houses of the poor are smaller and less elegant, but are of the same character as those of their wealthier neighbours. There is an abundant public supply of water for each house, with fountains in every garden and open space. The instinct of family life in the two upper classes is very strong, so that it is not easy for strangers to penetrate into these compact, secluded homes, where usually only near relatives are admitted except on the occasion of a wedding or a feast. Indeed, the family itself in upper-class life offers a tiny *imperium in imperio* throughout the

country, and this attitude of aloofness is encouraged by the hierarchy, who prefer to see all domestic suits and quarrels settled within the walls of the family mansion rather than in the court held daily in public.

Zapyro, which traditionally claims to be considered the ancient metropolis of the realm, is only about half the size of Tamarida. Its streets, though equally clean and well tended, are less animated; its market is smaller; its houses and gardens are all on a less ambitious scale; and this remark especially applies to the Temple of the Setting Sun which crowns a large rock behind the town. This sacred building, whose former ruinous condition I have lately sought to improve and have thereby acquired considerable merit in the eyes of the Zapyriotes, cannot compare in size and splendour with the magnificent fane at Tamarida. Only four members of the hierarchy reside here, and though the services connected with the hour of sunset are impressive, they are not comparable with those held in the great Temple of Tamarida. My own residence here consists of a block of buildings of moderate size, but then I only spend one month in Zapyro itself, my arrival being greeted with most flattering rejoicing on the part of the Zapyriotes, who also exhibit much despondency at the time of my departure. One peculiarity of this city is worth recording; and that is the circumstance that, unlike Tamarida, it possesses a civil governor who may not

belong to the priestly caste: a fiercely cherished honour that is believed to derive from very remote ages, when royalty resided here permanently. A leading member of the nobility is always chosen from his peers for this much-coveted distinction, which also includes the right to inhabit a portion of the rather exiguous palace at Zapyro, and the duty of holding the daily court of judgment in the absence of the King. The hierarchy is said to view these privileges with disfavour, but has hitherto hesitated to abolish the office in face of the pride and jealousy the Zapyriotes display in their retention of what is after all only a slight infringement of their universal powers of rule.

With regard to the third town, Fúfani, I gather it to be a place of recent growth. It is a large rambling unattractive seaport built on the marshy flats at the head of the Gulf of Fúfani. Its population consists entirely of families of the mercantile class and the populace who are engaged in the maritime trade of the southern ocean. The growth of Fúfani was, I understand, very rapid, so that the sudden realisation of this unauthorised collection of large numbers of citizens caused much misgiving amongst the senators at Tamarida, who took measures to scatter the community thus formed against their wishes. In this aim however the hierarchy was unsuccessful, largely, it is rumoured, owing to the sympathy of the reigning king, who found in the question of Fúfani a convenient occasion

for pitting his authority against that of the priesthood. Failing to induce the inhabitants of this new-sprung town to disperse themselves throughout the neighbouring districts, the priests now came to consider it the lesser of two evils to recognise Fúfani as a city, and accordingly erected a Temple of the Sun at this spot and nominated three priests to reside there. This measure has brought the people of Fúfani, who must evidently have shown some fierce spirit of opposition, if not of flat rebellion against the government, directly under the arm of the hierarchy, whose rule here is strengthened by a garrison of soldiers. I cannot help thinking it must have been my predecessor who thus encouraged the spirit of revolt, not wholly without success, at Fúfani, with the ultimate result that he "ceased to reign," as his fate is euphemistically described to me. I have so often longed to discover what is the end of undesirable or obnoxious monarchs; are they secretly murdered, I wonder, or are they confined in that sinister temple on Mount Crystal or some other retreat? Or are they merely deprived of the benefits of the Fountain of Rejuvenation, and so allowed to fall to decrepitude and old age, and finally death? What would I not give for some true guiding details of these concealed tragedies, of these unequal struggles between palace and temple! On the only occasion I have visited Fúfani I could not detect any overt sign of disaffection among the populace, though I did not fail to note the sour looks

of the priests accompanying me, as we rode through the rather squalid streets of the straggling featureless town, so different in its natural setting from Tamarida or Zapyro. There is no royal residence in Fúfani, and my visit hither was undertaken from the country seat of a neighbouring nobleman, who spoke of the town and its people with contemptuous dislike.

Before bringing this meagre and feeble sketch of Meleager to a close, and before proceeding to enlarge on the more interesting subject of the Meleagrians themselves, one final point of some importance occurs to my mind. This is the matter of their coinage, or rather medium of exchange. Although barter on an extensive scale and in a very sensible manner is largely utilised amongst merchants, and wages are frequently paid in kind, a system of coinage is in general use, the currency being limited to three coins. These are the golden "bezant," rather larger than our own half-sovereign; the silver "platera," about the size of a two-franc piece; and the bronze "denar," a little bigger than a penny. Each coin bears on its face the device of the sun, and on its reverse a raised lozenge in the case of the bezant, a square of the platera, and a circle of the denar, which marks can be distinguished in the dark. As the golden bezant is worth ten silver plateras, and each silver platera again is worth ten bronze denars, a simple system of decimal coinage may be said to prevail.

VII

Having described some of the natural features of Meleager, I now propose very shortly to speak of the various functionaries and classes of the realm. These may be divided into (1) the King; (2) the Hierarchy; (3) the Nobility; (4) the Mercantile class; (5) the Populace; and (6) Indentured servants or slaves.

As the King is the first official in the state, as well as its resident incarnated deity, I shall begin by speaking of my own powers and their many limitations. I have already explained the extraordinary genesis of the King of Meleager, how he is a native of the Earth, and is consequently on his arrival here utterly ignorant of the laws, traditions, polity and ideals of his new kingdom. At the end of five years I may add it is astonishing to reflect how terribly ignorant of all these matters I still remain, not through any fault of mine, but owing to the fixed intention of my practical masters, the hierarchy, to keep me in the dark concerning many affairs of importance in the realm for which they have themselves deliberately chosen me as monarch. The Arch-priest, whom I infinitely prefer to any of his colleagues, can be a perfect Sphinx of the most provoking silence at times, although, to do him

justice, he does occasionally impart information, which is invariably accurate and useful for my real guidance, whereas I cannot trust any statements made me by other members of the college. What I glean from Hiridia is of some general service certainly, but from the political standpoint it is valueless. This is not surprising, seeing that education, in the restricted meaning of that term, is practically confined to the members of the hierarchy; still, from the social side Hiridia has proved of great assistance to me in my relations with the nobles and other estates of the realm.

The King here, even making full allowance for the peculiar bonds wherein he is tied and bound to the hierarchy, wields considerable powers. He is, as I have already shown, the judge of the people in their courts, and to them his decisions are final and undisputed. The belief and devotion of the populace are therefore wholly concentrated in their resident King, who appears to them—and who can marvel at it?—as the authentic Child of the Sun, whose father they daily worship and praise for the light whereby they live, for the food they eat, and for the warmth they enjoy. I can easily understand the strong temptation that has driven one, and probably more, of my predecessors to utilise the undoubted credulity and loyalty of the populace in a struggle against the repressive influence of the ruling caste, and I can also, for I am fair-minded, perceive the reasonableness of the continual panic that animates

the hierarchy with regard to the relations existing between an alleged semi-divine monarch and a blindly adoring multitude. Any prospective understanding or union between these two forces of King and people is a constant source of jealousy and alarm to the priesthood, who are ever on the watch to prevent and stifle such intrigue should it arise. Yet, on the other hand, if once the King were goaded by indiscreet espionage or by harsh interference into revolt against official tutelage, then a personal appeal by the outraged Child of the Sun to his faithful people might very possibly result in the overthrow within a few hours of the whole fabric of government that it has taken so many centuries to rear. The open policy of the senators therefore must not tend to thwart or irritate the King; it must merely keep the sharpest outlook without awakening his suspicions; yet it must always be ready to guard against any sudden plot or combination between an ambitious King and a subservient populace. On the contrary, there must exist a mutual but unspoken compact between the monarch and the priesthood, in which the former should clearly and willingly realise his complete dependence on the latter, and submit in all things with a good grace. He is to be *particeps fraudis*, a sharer in the Great Imposture with its contrivers, and if he is content to play this rôle, well and good; but if he elects to kick against this tacit arrangement, the situation thus created must prove equally dangerous

both to King and hierarchy, and in such a crisis the priesthood never mean the King to triumph, no matter what measures they may be reduced to take in order to preserve their ascendency. For my own part I have done my utmost to make the priesthood realise that I comprehend and agree in and respect this silent bargain. Some of the councillors are however too suspicious and nervous by nature to appraise my attitude at its true value; and though I am on fairly friendly terms with the majority of my masters, there are certain members of the council whose evident hostility I can never hope to disarm.

From the deliberations in the council chamber in the Temple of the Sun I am invariably excluded, yet no measure within the realm is essayed without my knowledge, the Arch-priest acting as intermediary in all such cases. I am always permitted, and even encouraged, to work with the hierarchy, but I could never work against them, even if I would. The peculiar relations between our two sets of authority must necessarily always be most precarious and delicate, and call for the utmost exercise of patience, restraint and self-effacement on my part. Fortunately, so long as it is realised on both sides that our mutual powers are intermingled and interdependent, there is little fear of a collision such as either party would naturally seek to avoid in its own interests.

Except for the short ceremony observed on the morning of each weekly feast-day, the King rarely visits the temple. Twice a year however, at the

seasons of mid-summer and mid-winter, prior to the great public acts of worship before the crystal altar, I am subjected to a lengthy course of manipulation, followed by a dipping in the Fountain of Rejuvenation. In spite of the invigorating after-effects of this treatment, I confess I detest these two occasions most cordially, and their approach always fills my heart with intense bitterness at the thought of the humiliation that awaits me; nor can I shake off my feeling of chagrin for many days afterwards. Yet never a hint is uttered in my presence as to my dependence on the will of the hierarchy, nor has the Arch-priest ever alluded even in our most confidential talks to the intricacies of our unique relationship. To bear and forbear has therefore been the guiding note of my reign so far, and I earnestly hope that by following a similar course of conduct in the future I may contrive to continue thus on the throne of Meleager, for despite its many limitations and objections I am tolerably happy in my present situation. I have frankly accepted my anomalous position from the first, and as time progresses I find my perilous curiosity to peer behind the veil of The Secret grow less persistent and irksome.

I hope I have now explained with some degree of clarity the exact nature of the tie binding myself to the College of Seventy. The worst feature of my own position—and perhaps the worst also from the point of view of the hierarchy—is the haunting

sense of uncertainty, or rather the knowledge that I myself, my aims, my motives and my deeds are continually under discussion by this mysterious band of priestly potentates, with whom I am really unable to get into touch and to whom I cannot explain satisfactorily any matters that may arouse their distrust or suspicion. I often wish the members, at least of the outer circle, of the council would decide to take me into their complete confidence, so that we could all open our hearts freely to one another. I feel sure in such an event all cause of misunderstanding on their part would be speedily removed, whilst a greater feeling of security would result to themselves from this open alliance. But I know only too well that at present any such arrangement is utterly impossible, so I have to abide in the same uncomfortable and strained position which has already, I have every reason to believe, proved too onerous and exasperating for more than one of my fore-runners on the throne of Meleager.

With the nobility my part is naturally a far less difficult one to play. In the eyes of my courtiers, and of the many leading nobles who have access to my personal society, I am regarded not merely in theory but in very deed as a semi-divine creature, and am treated with the requisite degree of honour. But so natural and well bred are the manners of the Meleagrian aristocracy that this intense deference never sinks to fawning, nor becomes personally inconvenient, so that I can associate on terms of

easy familiarity with many of them. With their private affairs I have no great concern, seeing how strong is the patriarchal rule in each family; but sometimes as a last resort my opinion is invited, especially by the younger nobles, and such advice as I deign to supply is invariably regarded as the acme of wisdom and is promptly acted on.

With the commercial class I am brought much less into contact, so that I have smaller opportunity of observing its members. From time to time, however, I take pleasure in receiving accounts of travel by land and sea from some of the more intrepid merchant adventurers who sail the southern ocean, or penetrate the bleak hinterland of Barbaria. I have also acquired some merit in their eyes by making an expedition to the Barbarian coast, and visiting some of the settlements whence timber, furs and fish are exported to the south. The Archpriest has never expressed any opposition to this display of interest on my part, and he certainly encouraged my voyage to Barbaria; but I know well some members of the College of Seventy at the time objected to my proposed tour of inspection of the northern colonies. Their arguments, no doubt voiced in the council chamber, must however have been over-ruled, for my expedition was permitted.

By the third estate, as also by the large mass of indentured slaves or servants, I am of course adored, worshipped and regarded as a Divine

Incarnation. My appearance in the judgment hall calls forth diurnal blessings on my head, and persons of this class seek to kiss the hem of my robe in passing, or even manœuvre so that my shadow may fall upon them, much as the sick and decrepit of antique Asia Minor sought a blessing in the shadows of the early Apostles. I need not pursue this matter, for I have already made clear elsewhere the whole-hearted loyalty of the populace towards their King.

Apart from this deep attachment to my person of the commonalty of the kingdom, I possess too a certain amount of real power in the household of the palace and in the regiments of horse and foot that form my personal guards. All these wear my royal colour of blue in their livery or uniform, together with my badge of the sun in splendour. I can therefore well imagine the consequent jealousy and alarm of some members of the hierarchy being aroused by such an exhibition of potential strength, and I feel pretty sure of the presence of a number of spies both among my domestics and in the ranks of the military, who are constantly on the watch lest I should show any sign of pushing my advantage by these means. As such never has been, is not and never will be my intention, these official eavesdroppers can have nothing but what is reassuring to report to their employers. Nevertheless, the thought of this particular form of distrust is not pleasant, and it looms large among the various trials and disadvantages I have to endure in my exalted office.

VIII

Undoubtedly the most important feature in the whole body politic of Meleager is the ruling caste of the priests. I have at different times described these personages as a hierarchy of priests, as a college of senators, as a Council of Seventy, as a committee of councillors; but in reality none of these titles exactly expresses the nature or powers of this small executive clique selected from the nobility. The form, moreover, under which they are universally saluted or addressed in Meleager is simply "Arxattra," which signifies "Master." I had therefore better open with an account of the choice and composition of this body, whose sole check consists in the King whom they themselves call into being and can presumably dispose of in certain events. The priesthood (to use a convenient though inexact term) consists of never more than seventy-seven members nor less than seventy, and these are recruited solely from the aristocracy. The admission to this body is by election of the whole, and the candidates for this honour are confined to a number of probationers of the seminary that is situated within the precincts of the Temple of the Sun. These probationers are jealously excluded from all outside social

intercourse, and are carefully educated for at least five years with the object in view by members of the council itself. No one under the age of thirty-five may be admitted for election, and it is usual, though not essential, for the candidate to be a bachelor or a widower. On his election, the successful candidate quits his college and retires to the Temple of the Sun, where apartments exist for every member of the council. This severe regulation as to age and family ties is obviously intended to preserve the conservative traditions of the hierarchy, for the human mind naturally is inclined to hark back affectionately to the conditions prevailing in youth and to prefer such to any later standard of morals and administration. At the same time the many services and duties to be performed by the junior councillors require the election of active and able-bodied members, for though the Temple of the Sun is the headquarters and official home of these councillors, yet many of them are in constant peregrination throughout the kingdom. Four priests reside at Zapyro; three at Fúfani; two are said to be in residence within the forbidden temple on Mount Crystal. All have their proper spheres of work assigned to them, and membership of this all-powerful council, far from being the sinecure I once conceived it, entails an immense amount of exertion, both mental and physical.

From the moment of his election there is an amplitude of employment for the new-comer. Thus

of the junior councillors four hold the onerous posts of registrars of all births and deaths throughout the realm, their business in this capacity taking them far afield, for the whole system of Meleagrian registration is closely bound up with its public policy and edicts. Two more are concerned with the shipping and fishing industries; two with the control and inspection of the colonies in Barbaria; two are entrusted with the interests of the many indentured labourers; two or more act as commissioners of forest lands; at least four are charged with the important and troublesome duties as regards public sanitation and hygiene; and so on till every public department falls under the direct supervision of the nominees of this Council of Seventy and more. Such a shuffling and allocation of public offices may seem arbitrary and detestable to the windy demagogues of our twentieth-century civilisation; but I can assure my readers, as the result of my most careful and unbiased observation, the practical effect on the well-being of the community at large far exceeds any vaunted results that ever I saw or heard of in any democratic community on Earth. Nor do I marvel; for jobbery, sentimentalism, waste, financial dabbling, denominational intrigue, family influence are all necessarily absent from the workings of a council that is composed only of highly trained persons of gentle birth who, having resigned all the domestic and material interests of life, have no private or monetary ends to consider,

but act solely for the benefit of the state, which they have chosen voluntarily to serve after a long preliminary course of special education.

Whenever a member of the council dies, or through failure of health is placed on an honorary footing, the vacant place is quickly filled. The last elected member of the hierarchy summons the chosen probationer and leads him to the council chamber where his brother members are assembled. Here he kneels, whilst a homily on the nature of the high honour conferred on him and the vast sum of confidence reposed in him, is read aloud by the Archpriest, who acts as president. Impressive rites follow, for nothing is omitted to prove to the new member the terrible fate that awaits any councillor who may be found guilty of any disloyalty, or of even breathing a hint of The Secret, which he is now empowered to learn. What is the fate reserved for any indiscreet or treacherous councillor I cannot say; but I fancy breaches of confidence in the council itself must have been as rare in the past annals of Meleager as was the crime of Marino Faliero in those of the old Venetian republic, whose constitution, by the way, has evidently been carefully digested by the hierarchy. The oath of implicit obedience and of absolute silence having been administered, the new member is then led forward to have his crimson cloak and tunic removed and replaced by the voluminous white robes of his new order. He next receives the formal congratulations

of all his colleagues, and is then made fully acquainted with the nature of The Secret, though I myself have a pretty shrewd notion his mind has already been cautiously prepared beforehand for its reception, so that he in fact possesses something more than a mere inkling of the impending revelation, which is announced with due solemnity. Here however the new member's information ceases, so that he possesses exactly the same limited amount of knowledge of The Secret as do I myself. Whether the new councillor will eventually arrive at a position of such trust and reputation as to be invited to enter the interior ring of the council, time alone can show. And it is of this paramount inner force within the council that I now wish to speak.

Of this small secret council within a larger secret council I can only state with certainty that its numbers vary from fourteen (the minimum) to twenty, which latter figure is never exceeded. The members of this inner clique are elected from the other members of the council, but on what principles I cannot say. The great difference between the larger and the smaller sets within the council is this: the latter not only know The Secret, but they are the individuals who carry out its details and work its machinery for the purposes I have already explained. With one exception every member of this interior circle has some time or another performed the voyage between the Earth and Meleager; and how strangely does it strike me

in my utter solitude to reflect that here in Meleager are nearly a score of persons whose acquaintance with the planet of my birth is in some ways more extensive than my own! The sole exception is the Arch-priest, who may not be transported to Earth, because he is the one person who is in constant and close touch with the King. The limitation is subtle, but it is sound; for I can imagine some fine possibilities of intrigue between the King and the Arch-priest, if the latter had not only visited the Earth but was also familiar with the extraordinary methods whereby that end was attained. (I need hardly add that no senator of the inner ring is ever allowed to address or visit the King except in the presence of two other councillors.) This picked handful of the council chooses the Arch-priest from the general body, so that this functionary stands in an intermediate position of knowledge concerning the working of The Secret, for he thus knows more than the ordinary member of the council and less than his brethren of the inner ring. He is chiefly charged with the control of the services and staff of the temple, and he has also to superintend the establishment on Mount Crystal, where (so I strongly suspect) are kept in honourable confinement those aged members of the council who have grown infirm or garrulous under stress of years. What exact share these persons of the inner ring partake in the working of The Secret I naturally cannot tell; and I often speculate as to whether

they themselves are mechanicians possessing a skill far beyond that achieved by any of our engineers on Earth, or whether they merely control certain servants who own the necessary technical knowledge to carry out the intricacies of the aerial machinery under their instruction. In other words, are these score of elderly men their own mechanics, or are they only overseers of others? For there are certainly large numbers of assistants attached to the service of the council, and a certain proportion of these menials I know to be deaf and dumb, the result, it is whispered, of a certain cruel operation which is inflicted sometimes with the consent of the patient, and sometimes (so I gather) by force following on brutal seizure. Is it that the priests are ever on the look-out for capable young mechanics to train for this purpose, and are such promising youths liable to disappear? On the other hand, many of these deaf and dumb servants of the temple have families, and apart from their unknown duties seem free to come and go; being dumb, they cannot chatter, and being deaf they cannot listen; and since the native language is purely phonetic and not literary, people so afflicted cannot converse with their fingers, as is the case with our deaf-mutes on Earth. My own theory is that these persons, having a natural taste in things scientific, are first carefully trained so as to acquire all the technical skill necessary for the accomplishment of the details of The Secret, and are then to their surprise

suddenly given the option of being rendered deaf and dumb to be thus retained in the service of the council, or of being instantly and privately executed, for the hierarchy would have no scruples in so acting if by their refusal to submit The Secret were in any way endangered. All this reasoning however on my part is, I admit, founded on pure supposition. For aught I can adduce to the contrary, the journey to and from the Earth may be accomplished by means of some unknown power of levitation, such as is only claimed on Earth by the mahatmas and skooshoks of Tibet, whose wild theories are laughed to scorn by all enlightened Europeans and Americans. There are, I know, vast vaults beneath the Temple of the Sun, and perhaps these may shelter aeroplanes and cars of a type and capacity undreamed of on Earth; on the other hand, these capacious cellars may merely contain treasure and archives, or indeed nothing at all. Possibly there may be elaborate machines concealed in the temple on Mount Crystal, for I am convinced that it is on this conspicuous mountain that the returning Meleagrian envoys from the Earth alight. But I frankly confess I am completely at a loss to explain the system of communication with the Earth; it is a fascinating subject for speculation, but I am also fully cognizant of its perils to any would-be investigator.

Although there can be comparatively little fear of intrigue arising between the King and the

councillors of the second grade, yet there exists no real friendliness or confidence between us. They treat me outwardly with marked deference, whilst I in my turn always show myself cordial and polite, but I have no personal friend in the whole body except the Arch-priest, for whom I have conceived a genuine liking and respect. My intimate companions are practically confined to the nobility, and though they are ignorant and illiterate, yet I prefer their honest prattle to any cautious discussion or interchange of lofty ideas with the highly educated priesthood. Nevertheless, I cannot refrain from eulogising the unselfish devotion of these persons to their tasks of administration, which is shown equally by every member. The clique of the interior circle do not of course participate in the actual business of government, for they are presumed to have reached a higher plane of usefulness to the state, but the junior councillors pursue their avocations with unflagging zeal. The tedious work of registration, which entails constant vigilance and many journeys to remote places; the settlement of trade questions; the management of the twin departments of medicine and sanitation; the marshalling of taxation; the control of the army; —all these and many other duties occupy the whole existence of the councillors who know no rest or respite from their allotted tasks.

Take the instance of hygiene alone. The accumulated wisdom of some two thousand years of the

Earth's progress in the science of healing lies all at the disposal of the executive hierarchy of Meleager. And I feel compelled to pay a sincere tribute to the intelligent industry of the councillors in their untiring efforts to produce everywhere a "*corpus sanum in civitate sanâ.*" The abundant water-supplies of the cities; the meticulous care wherewith every source of contamination is traced; the constant experiments that are made daily in the hospitals (less elaborately equipped than our own, but fully as clean and serviceable); the thoughtful measures to preserve existing health and to improve the physical condition of the mass of the citizens;—all testify to the common-sense and thoroughness of the means adopted by the ministers of public hygiene and eugenics. Thanks to their wise measures pure water, pure air, wholesome food, the prompt eradication of all epidemics, and the segregation of the physically or morally unsound are gradually producing a race that for health and happiness has no parallel on our progressive democratic Earth, where the boasted advance of European civilisation only conveys in its train to healthy but nominally uncivilised tribes and nations every species of moral, physical and æsthetic evil that did not exist under the old conditions of isolation and ignorance.

Although belonging to the aristocratic caste, yet these servants of the state wield their power with magnificent impartiality, weeding out the weaklings

alike in the families of noble, merchant or plebeian. Adult degenerates are always removed to the island of Madù off the northern coast. Here the sexes are kept apart, but the poor creatures are permitted to live in tolerable comfort and to receive visits from their relatives, who however (it must be confessed) usually display no very marked anxiety to avail themselves of this privilege. For as time advances, it is commonly coming to be regarded as a social offence to harbour in one's household any idiotic or misshapen being. Thus almost all Meleagrians now heartily concur in the state regulations whereby all infants with obvious mental or bodily defects are at once strangled by the officials who attend in the train of the visiting councillors, and they also make little or no objection to the deporting of grown criminals to Madù.

This public acquiescence in a measure destined solely for the improvement of the race as a whole is, I believe, of comparatively recent date. For a long time the removal of malformed and idiotic infants, as well as the enforced deportation of lunatics or seriously diseased persons, was strongly resented by their families; but firm persistence on the part of the hierarchy and a gradual spread of reasonableness among the whole community have slowly gained the public approval for severe regulations that were at first as novel as they were distasteful. I particularly mention this case, as it tends to show that though conciliation of the populace must always

form one of the leading tenets of the council's policy, yet it can on occasion enforce an unpopular edict throughout the nation in its own interest, despite the indignant protests of all classes. I have been told that the then reigning King, a most enlightened Switzer, did splendid service for the council by personally in his capacity of Child of the Sun, ordering his father's own people to obey the new regulations. How long ago this struggle arose I have no notion ; and oh, how often have I yearned to learn more concerning that predecessor of mine whose memory is still gratefully held by the hierarchy to-day! How and under what circumstances did he finally "cease to reign"? Did he later on attempt to oppose the ruling body, after having saved it from possible collapse? But no questions of mine, however artfully or artlessly addressed, could ever secure me any but evasive answers.

I can never fix in my inconstant mind my exact feeling towards these "potent, grave and reverend signiors" of the council, these impassive and industrious priests (who are in reality not priests at all, for their task is almost purely a secular one, the priestly office being practically merged in that of the statesman). And in the performance of these duties they are as unselfish as they are indefatigable ; nor is there any apparent taint of personal jealousy or internal intrigue amongst the hierarchy. When during my rides abroad for pleasure or for hunting I see a pair of these white-robed councillors,

equally servants and rulers of the state, visit some remote hamlet and observe the scrupulous care and the genuine interest wherewith they inquire into and carry out every necessary arrangement for the public weal; and when I consider the implicit faith placed by the country folk in their rulers, I am somehow reminded of the mission of the Apostles of old as they wandered through the towns and villages of the Roman world healing and assisting helpless humanity. At other times, however, I am inclined to regard them with a mixture of hatred and contempt, whenever I reflect on the unprecedented system of conscious fraud whereon all their beneficent action rests. How strange, for example, must it seem for a newly elected candidate to learn for the first time that the religious teaching he has imbibed from infancy is a deliberate fabrication, which he himself is now called on to champion and perpetuate; that the divinity of the Sun is a hollow myth; that his Child is a mortal from another planet; that the world of Meleager, far from being the special creation and care of the Sun-god, is in reality a mere speck in a vast solar system, such as has been propounded by our own astronomers Copernicus and Galileo. What a terrible moment it must prove for a sensitive soul, implected with the beautiful mythology of a lifetime, when in a trice the whole of his religious environment is stripped rudely from him like a garment! I often meditate on the unique moral dilemma that must

face every new councillor. How fearful an awakening! How difficult for a conscientious nobleman to combine the two phases of a public benefactor and of a promulgator of an elaborate lie! Has any Meleagrian noble of high integrity I wonder ever had the courage or conscience, at the supreme moment, to protest, even at the risk of death? But I presume the preliminary training and preparation bestowed on all probationers are carefully contrived to soften so great a shock, and to lead the postulant gently towards the amazing revelations made at the time of his reception into the council.

The dress of the hierarchy is simple, consisting outwardly of a white woollen toga-like garment that is free from all ornament. I suspect the adoption of this style of dress is borrowed from that of classical Rome, whose laws and customs evidently form the basis of the Meleagrian constitution. A white wand is carried in the hand, and a white fillet is bound round the temples; only on the two great half-yearly festivals are the ornate gold-fringed garments worn in public. The robes of the Arch-priest are likewise of a white woollen material, which in his case are relieved by a bordure of gold brocade, whilst the wand and fillet are also of gold; but on state occasions he dons magnificent vestments of cloth of gold and wears a golden mitre on his head. The Arch-priest's office is naturally more sacerdotal in its nature than that of his comrades,

for it is he who is entrusted with the due performance of all the services of the temple, and he too assists at the solemn ceremony of censing the crystal altar of the Sun, as I have already shown. He is also the custodian of the awful Fountain of Rejuvenation, though his guardianship is shared by other members of the inner ring. One day, finding the venerable head of the council in an unusually expansive mood, I ventured to question him openly upon the properties of this sacred well, this Zem-Zem of Meleagrian un-faith. He replied that its medicated waters, though highly beneficial to a mortal born of the Earth, would prove fatal to any Meleagrian rash enough to attempt their use. Moreover, he added that should anyone plunge alone and unattended into this well, the terrific suction of the current beneath would infallibly drag the body under, never to reappear. I then questioned him if many such accidents had ever occurred, whereupon he answered dryly that none had happened in his own experience; which equivocal reply I interpreted as admitting that fatal incidents in the past were by no means unknown. I then twitted him jokingly for not renewing his own youth, of course with all proper precautions, in the fountain of his charge, to which he replied with considerable asperity and horror, using the most solemn Meleagrian form of denial: "May the God perish first and the Sun be darkened!" After this vigorous negation he took his departure

with some abruptness, nor could I ever entice him to speak again of the fountain.

I fully realise that my account of the hierarchy or governing class of Meleager is both incomplete and unsatisfactory, but I must plead again the many difficulties of obtaining information which I have already mentioned. In fact, it is from two sources only that I can derive any details whatever, these being my own limited opportunities of observation and discovery and the rare statements that the Arch-priest lets fall from time to time, for I am not on confidential terms with any other member of the council. From Hiridia and my friends of the nobility I can gather absolutely nothing, for the simple reason that their own ignorance of the private affairs of their ruling caste is even greater than mine. Indeed, the marvel is that I have been able to compile even the small amount I have inscribed here, considering the obstacles in my way of acquiring knowledge. I must sum up therefore by stating that I have very little communication with that body of councillors with whom my own position and prerogative are so closely interwoven, this state of affairs being due wholly to the persistent refusal of the latter to take me into their confidence.

IX

Of the nobility I can speak with more confidence, for with many of them I am on terms of intimacy and friendship. The well-bred gentleman is not confined in our own world to any special climate or nation, for he is to be found equally under a white, a yellow, a brown and even a black skin; and the gentle type is also indigenous on the planet of Meleager.

The aristocracy of Meleager is closely connected with the land, and it is to some extent strongly impregnated with feudal principles. Every noble is either the owner of an estate, be it large, moderate or small, or else is connected by family ties with the actual landowner. Each house forms a distinctive *gens* in itself, and all its male members are entitled to bear a badge, which is its peculiar mark. These badges at first suggested to my mind a relic of totem-kin, but I soon changed my opinion on this point, and now hold the family badge to be heraldic in its aim and use. I gather that the adoption of a conspicuous badge or emblem for each family is of considerable antiquity, and perhaps derives from reports made by the Meleagrian envoys on Earth at the period of the Crusades, when coat-armour came into fashion among the chivalry of Western Christendom.

The mass of the nobles exhibits various degrees of wealth and influence, and I have noted the existence of some ill-feeling between the leading magnates and the smaller landowners. The social cleavage between the two sets is however imperceptible, and the constant intermarriage between the families of what I may call the major and the minor barons tends to eradicate many cases of jealousy. This landed aristocracy has, of course, its chief residence in the country districts, though the wealthier families possess houses in the cities in addition. The country house of Meleager is usually of moderate size, and consists of a low square white-washed mansion enclosing a courtyard. The native love of colonnades is prominently exhibited in these houses, which are frequently surrounded on all sides by loggias that can be utilised according to the varying conditions of weather. The arrangements within are somewhat primitive according to our own luxurious standards of the twentieth century, but they are not without a sufficiency of comfort. The floors are generally tiled; there are no rugs or carpets, save some skins of beasts; the furniture, though often elaborately carved, is not plentiful. There are no family portraits, for the art of painting pictures is unknown, but in compensation for this defect there is always the curious family chapel or mausoleum. This has usually a low domed roof pierced by windows of coloured glass that admit only a dim light within the chamber which seems very similar to the *columbaria* of the

Romans, from whom I conclude this idea has been borrowed by their unknown admirers. Rows of small semicircular apertures line the walls, many of these standing empty, whilst not a few are occupied by busts of deceased members of the family. Beneath these effigies are placed small urns of metal or marble which contain the ashes, for cremation has for sanitary reasons been made compulsory in Meleager for many centuries past. Some of these busts are of no small artistic merit, and evidently well portray the features of the noble ancestors; others again are of inferior workmanship; whilst some are obviously merely conventional in their treatment. Such a collection certainly forms rather a gruesome substitute for a family portrait gallery, but its atmosphere does not seem to depress the spirits of the present generation, for I am always cheerfully invited to enter and inspect these queer oratories. The surrounding gardens are often beautiful, but are far less artificial than our own. One broad long flagged terrace usually suffices for the family to stroll; otherwise the paths and lawns are unkempt and neglected. These pleasances are however full of a luxuriant growth of wild or half-wild flowers, so that I found myself often being reminded of the exuberant gardens of old-world Italian villas in past days, before the late irruption of wealthy cosmopolitan tourists had succeeded in thoroughly vulgarising Italy and modernising all its old peaceful haunts.

Country life as pursued in Meleager varies little in its essence from that of our Earth, *mutatis mutandis*, for time is pretty evenly divided between the attractions of sport and the claims of estate management and domestic concerns. Everything is, of course, conducted in a manner that would appear as primitive to our pampered sportsmen as it would seem suggestive to the antiquary, for both field sports and agriculture have remained here in the mediæval, or even sometimes in the archaic, stage of development. Firearms, though not unknown, are at least never employed, so that in hunting the spear, the net, the trap and even the bow still constitute the chief weapons of the chase. All ploughing is performed by oxen with wooden implements, and the thorough cultivation of the crops is on a tiny scale. Again and again have the conditions of Meleagrian rural life recalled to me the old-world bucolic practices of Tuscany and Castile, that even down to the close of the nineteenth century retained so many picturesque features of remote classical times. The tenor of existence in the country is quiet enough, and would prove unspeakably dull and irksome to the majority of our modern squires; but it must be remembered that the Meleagrian landowners have no newspapers, no novels, no Stock Exchange, no party politics to sweeten and distract their daily round, so that they are perfectly content to follow in the secure footsteps of their forefathers. Should the younger men find

the calm routine of country life wearisome, there are other avenues of occupation open to such restless souls. In the first place there is the army, which is officered solely by members of the aristocracy, some of whom make a permanent profession of their military duties and attain in due course to the higher commands therein. The usual plan is, however, for the younger sons of the noble houses to spend some three or four years in the army, after which they marry and come to settle in homes of their own, where they busy themselves for the rest of their lives with a medley of sport, agriculture and domestic economy. Again, the life at Court is open to a certain number of those who care neither for a career in the army nor for the monotony of the countryside. Here they participate in the constant variety of the palace, and hope to win honorary appointments in the royal household. A few, more adventurous still than their fellows, proceed to Barbaria either for the purpose of better hunting, or for the sake of the harder and more exciting life in a new sphere of energy. Some proportion of these latter obtain grants of land in this less than half-occupied territory, where they found new estates modelled on the old lines, much as the younger scions of our gentle English houses emigrated and settled in Virginia. Such experiments moreover are strongly commended and encouraged by the special councillors who are charged with the conduct of colonial affairs.

Yet another and a far more important means of escape from the alleged tedium of family or rustic routine is the career of the probationer, who aspires eventually to be elected a member of the hierarchy. This ambition cannot, however, be gratified before the age of thirty, when the intending candidate is admitted to the school of the neophytes. Here for a year he receives a course of lectures on Meleagrian history and is taught the rudiments of Latin grammar, but no instruction in reading or writing is yet afforded him. At the end of a twelvemonth of such preliminary training, the neophyte is either rejected as unfit or unsuitable, or else he is admitted a probationer of the seminary attached to the Temple of the Sun. In that case he receives a five years' course of far more advanced tuition; he is taught to read, write and speak the Latin language; and presumably he is also instructed in astronomy, politics, theology and other subjects concerning which his existing notions must be strangely vague or wholly erroneous. This long period of instruction entails a severe strain on the pupil, who is henceforth cut off from all private and external ties and interests, for he is never allowed to quit the precincts of his seminary. Of his final election and reception into the council of the hierarchy I have spoken elsewhere. Whether or no any candidate has ever failed to obtain his election and has been consequently compelled to remain in the institution for years, perhaps for the term of his

lifetime, I cannot say; yet I do know for a fact that for its inmates there is but one door leading out of the seminary of probationers and that is the door which admits to the council chamber.

I always enjoy my occasional visits to the country seats of the nobility, where the calm useful healthy life affords an agreeable change to me from the atmosphere of the palace, which seems always charged with mystery and intrigue. The genuine greeting of my host and the members of his family, the delightful blend of divine honours and of frank hospitality wherewith I am everywhere received, the pride shown in their farms and agricultural schemes, the general air of repose and safety, all tend to soothe a mind that has grown perplexed and wearied with the endless cares of an exalted but anomalous office. The conversation of these uneducated but well-bred persons is certainly not exciting, and might fairly be described as trivial, but really I do not think, from past experience, that it is more trifling or banal than the average talk of the British aristocracy which of recent years has elevated sport and money-making to be the prevalent topics of society (using that term in its narrow technical application). And though all these excellent folk in Meleager are of necessity quite illiterate in the sense that they cannot read and write, their memory is marvellous, so that often after the evening meal the different members of the household recite whole poems in the Meleagrian language,

or else tell stories that are by no means devoid of wit and imagination. Often too there is singing to the native lute of sweet melodious songs, which are well rendered by the fresh voices of the young performers.

The land tenure of Meleager may perhaps be best described as a modified form of primogeniture. The family estate, whether large or small, descends in tail male, and only in the failure of masculine issue in the whole family to the female heirs of the last possessor. This strict entail is, however, subject to certain limitations, which tend to allow provision for the widow and daughters of the landowner. Moreover, all members of the family have a species of life interest in the estate, so long as they continue unmarried. Thus on the death of a father, the eldest-born will inherit, but the new owner's younger brothers (and also his unmarried uncles), if still residing under the family roof, own the right to remain in their old home. Patriarchal life in this manner becomes highly developed, and the family council consisting of all its male and all its unmarried female members can exercise considerable power over all private affairs within the scope of the family circle. Thus the expulsion of an unworthy relative can be arranged, and this inherent family rule is admitted and upheld by the hierarchy. A noble thus expelled forfeits his right to bear the family badge, and also has to relinquish the crimson cloak and tunic of his order. A member so

degraded sinks automatically into the ranks of the plebeian or third estate, and is generally lost sight of. Such incidents are rare, but they do occur occasionally, and this private form of prerogative to drive into social exile is undisputed.

Although a very distinct line is drawn between the Reds and the Greens, between the noble and the mercantile classes, there seems no contempt or envy of class on either side. Such jealousy as exists is rather noticeable within the ranks of the aristocracy itself, wherein, though nominally all are of equal rank, some are rich and some poor, some influential and some of little account. And the same remark holds good of the conditions prevailing in the mercantile class. Taxation of the landed interest is raised in two ways: first by a direct tax on land itself, which is apportioned at certain intervals; and second, by a poll-tax on every noble. Occasionally a landed estate left without any male heirs is sold for the benefit of the female inheritors; but it is clear that in the vast majority of cases the present estates in Meleager have descended in unbroken succession and unreduced in area for many generations.

As to the characteristics of the Meleagrian nobles, doubtless they have their failings, but these in my estimation are fully redeemed by their many good qualities. There is apparent some display of haughtiness in the higher nobility towards other less wealthy members of their own caste, but their

attitude and bearing towards their many dependents and also towards the general populace would be worthy of imitation even in our so-called democratic world. Of course such intimacy as I can attain with them is necessarily limited, when one considers my own range of knowledge and their utter inability to grasp the meaning of any one of the many serious questions that perpetually vex my mind. I sometimes have the sensation of living in a world of shadows, with which I sport and even converse, for the mental gulf fixed between me and them is fathomless and unbridgeable. Even my Hiridia, faithful friend and delightful companion though he be, seems often a plaything rather than a co-equal being of the same flesh and blood as myself. I can study all these people and analyse with ease their simple empty minds; I can sympathise with their artless pleasures and pastimes; I can play and sing and hunt and bathe and feast with them;—but I cannot talk with them seriously any more than can a septuagenarian professor carry on a rational conversation with a child. Yet all the same they are charming grown-up children; and was it not the Divine Master of our world who more than once insisted that to share His promised kingdom all His grown-up hearers must become as little children? Nevertheless, despite such consoling thoughts, the fact remains that I am always lonely.

Of the mercantile class I intend to say very little.

So much that I have just written applies with equal force to the Greens, or second estate of the realm. I am often entertained by the leading merchants of Tamarida and Zapyro, but these occasions really produce little more than the exchange of polite formalities, and I know far less of these persons than I do of the nobility. A portion of this class is connected with the land in the form of yeomen, or small freeholders, whose properties are however confined to Barbaria or to the poorer districts of the Regio Solis. In their case the law of primogeniture is enforced more strictly than amongst the landed aristocracy, for as the yeoman's estate is reckoned insufficient to provide for all the males of the family, only the eldest son enjoys the paternal acres. The younger sons are accordingly dispatched to make their living or fortune in some trade, and it is usually the stalwart young men of this small landed stock who supply the greater part of the petty officers in the army. The great majority of the Greens, as they are commonly termed, are traders either on a large or a small scale, though a certain number fill some of the lesser official posts of stewards and assistants in connection with the work of the hierarchy. In the case of members of this order who have amassed considerable wealth and are desirous of entering the class of the nobles, application is made to the council, and such appeals are either granted or refused after a full hearing of the circumstances. The royal consent is likewise

necessary for the bestowal of this coveted privilege; and I may add that such applications constitute the sole exception to the general rule, that the nobles are never given to intrigue with myself. Naturally they are jealous concerning the prerogative of their order, and some at least are certain to resent fiercely any such attempts of outsiders to be admitted to their ranks. A good many of such appeals are rejected, but in the event of a successful application a large contribution has to be paid to the coffers of the temple and the palace; a landed estate has somehow to be purchased, usually in Barbaria, and then the fortunate postulant doffs the green robes and dons the red, which he is now permitted to wear, and also assumes the use of a badge granted him by the King, who selects the emblem he deems most suitable. The position of the new-comers for a considerable time, perhaps for a couple of generations, is not an enviable one, for they are treated coldly and looked at askance by the majority of their fellow-nobles. But as the older folk pass away, and memories grow shorter, the new lord, or rather his progeny, becomes gradually absorbed by matrimonial connection into the mass of the nobility, and intermingles with the rest. Still, the stigma of having risen from the Greens clings, I fancy, to this type of pseudo-aristocratic house for a long time. On the other hand, marriage with a junior member of the nobility at once confers the husband's rank on a bride of the second estate,

who henceforth ceases to hold open intercourse with her own family. Contrariwise, ladies of the nobility who ally themselves with merchants or yeomen sink to the level of their husbands' station.

With the populace again I have more intimacy and sympathy than with the Greens, and through my attendants and bodyguard at the palace I am brought more closely into touch with the people at large. This third estate of the realm consists of all the manual labourers, the artisans, the fisher-folk, and in short all such persons as live by receiving wages, whether in money or kind. I have already hinted that their condition and well-being form the constant care of the councillors, who see that their homes are sanitary, well built and generally adequate, whilst the wages paid must be deemed sufficient to support the individual or his family in decency and comfort. In fact, the supervision of this, the largest and economically the most important section of the community, constitutes the first care of the hierarchy. The people seem hale and happy, nor do they exhibit any envy of the better-fed and better-clad Greens, nor yet of the majestic and privileged Reds. The rules of family life prevail less strongly here owing to the wider dispersal of its members, but they are nominally identical with those in the classes above. There are no law courts in Meleager, and usually disputes and difficulties in this class are settled, as I have already

shown, in the judgment hall of the capital, where I sit on most days. The women-folk of the third estate live in less seclusion than do those of the nobility and merchants, a result that is due (as in our Mohammedan countries) to the necessity of the poor having to perform their marketing and daily business in public. This same class also may be said to include the numerous tribe of indentured labourers, mostly from Barbaria, whose status somewhat resembles that of the Roman slaves under the Empire. Vice and drunkenness, though by no means unfrequent, are not conspicuous in this class; whilst the police patrols keep a pretty sharp eye on the landlords of the lower sort of wine-shop and brothel. These resorts of the more dissipated of the people are also visited at times by the councillors charged with their management and reputation, so that the streets of Tamarida at night would compare favourably with those of most European cities, and such debauchery as does exist is assuredly kept well concealed behind doors and is not allowed to offend the eyes or the ears of the passer-by in the streets, which, though dark and narrow, can be safely traversed by all after nightfall. A few cases of quarrelling and use of the knife occur and are severely punished by the lash whenever the culprits are brought to book; deliberate murder is very rare; theft is not frequent; assaults on women and children are practically unknown. So far as my observations tend, I can sum up without hesita-

tion by saying that the proletariat of Meleager is a remarkably happy, healthy, well-behaved, industrious and sober body under what I may call the benign despotism of councillors who have not only been educated to command by years of special training, but also possess a natural gift for such functions.

X

I SHOULD not like the reader from anything I have written hitherto to carry away the impression that, because I am myself debarred from their society, the women of Meleager own a status at all similar to that prevailing in Mohammedan countries. On the contrary, setting aside the exceptional case of their semi-divine monarch, the sex has little to lament on the score of inferior or unfair treatment. The Council of Seventy, it is true, contains no female element, but to balance this, the college of the priestesses of the Sun, which I shall describe presently, wields considerable powers in the government of the state. Moreover, the severe restrictions concerning their relations with the King rest, at least nominally, on religious grounds and would therefore naturally be less likely to cause resentment. I think therefore I had better first discuss the existing attitude of my female subjects towards myself, for on this point I can at least offer some correct and detailed information, both from personal knowledge and as the result of inquiries I have from time to time cautiously ventured to make of the older women, with whom alone I am permitted to hold social intercourse.

No unimportant part of the religious training

which every girl receives at her mother's knee in Meleager is the Sun Myth, with its picturesque fables of the Sun-god and his incarnated Child. The divine nature and mission of the latter are always dwelt on by the teacher with particular insistence and with due solemnity; and his sanctity is described as placing him outside the pale of ordinary men with ordinary passions. And not only this. Should the Child of the Sun forget the sacred character of his entrusted mission to his father's people and flout his father's precepts so far as to stoop to philander with any maiden of his kingdom, not only will the disobedient monarch incur his divine parent's grave displeasure, but also a most terrible fate awaits the unhappy object of his attentions. From this last portion of the advice instilled into the growing female mind, I conclude that alarming scandals have actually occurred in the past; and who can marvel at it? But how recent or remote are these love intrigues in date; and how or where or when they were detected and punished I am quite ignorant, nor am I ever likely to receive enlightenment thereon. But it is also in harmony with my theory of past troubles of this nature that a salutary story (which is by no means regarded here as a legend) has long been in circulation. The tale itself is strongly reminiscent of the old Greek myth of Zeus and Semele, and in Meleager it takes the shape of an intrigue between a foolish maiden of the people, Anata by name, and

the then reigning Child of the Sun, who fell a victim to her charms or her advances. For it is gravely related that Anata actually made her way to the private apartments of the King by stealth. Whether or no she obtained any satisfaction from her forbidden interview will never be known, but it is certain her body was found next morning in the royal bed-chamber charred and almost unrecognisable as the dire result of her clandestine embraces in the arms of the son of the God of Fire. To become the mistress therefore of the Sun-child, should the monarch descend so low as to forget his divine calling, is but the certain prelude to an ignominious and horrible death; and such a belief is firmly held by all women dwelling on Meleager. It is also pronounced dangerous (as it is voted most decidedly immodest) for any young woman, whether maiden or married, to allow even the casual glance of the Sun-child to fall full on her face; so that it is usual for all girls to fling the light veil, or mantilla, which every Meleagrian woman wears, over her features in the event of her encountering accidentally the person of the King. This custom, however, is not an actual regulation, and I have often noticed girls, especially those of the populace, indulge in a good solid stare as I have come riding or walking down the streets of the capital, though sooner or later some pretence of covering the eyes with the veil was carried out. Amongst the nobility this formal hiding of the face is more strictly insisted on, if

only as a detail of good breeding. From what I have seen, the young women of Meleager are short, dark and comely, with fine brown merry eyes, small features, and dark hair. In extreme youth they are often remarkably pretty and attractive, but after child-birth they are very liable to lose their elegant symmetry, and to find what was an agreeable plumpness exchanged for a rather prominent bulkiness of figure.

I have never yet so much as spoken to a woman below the age of thirty or thereabouts, and though the fundamental law forbidding my intimacy with any woman in the pride and beauty of her youth is quite wise and logical, according both to the letter and the spirit of Meleagrian state craft, yet it is a rule that presses very cruelly upon myself. For remember, *I* do not grow old and languid; my own vitality is mysteriously renewed at short intervals, and male youth craves the society and companionship of female youth; whilst also in my case this natural desire can never diminish with the passing of the years. In this respect I stand therefore betwixt the devil and the deep sea, between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand, I have to curb my juvenile longings and tastes which tend rather to grow stronger and more insistent; whilst on the other, any attempt to circumvent this ordinance of the hierarchy would not only end in my own discomfiture, and possibly removal, but would most certainly result in the miserable fate of any poor

favourite of my choice. The story of silly Anata's disgrace was not invented by the hierarchy merely to serve as an empty fable, one may be sure of that. I feel convinced, too, that the palace teems with spies for this very purpose of thwarting any such intrigue, and though hitherto I have given no cause even for suspicion, I feel my position most acutely. It is so false, and I know it to be false, and so do those who have manœuvred this particular piece of policy concerning their monarch.

When women have once exceeded the age of thirty (which is considered the child-bearing limit in Meleager), and have presumably lost all officially suspected attraction in the eyes of the Child of the Sun, the embargo is removed, though there is never much intercourse between the King and the middle-aged or elderly ladies of the nobility. Whenever I honour the country home of one of my nobles with my presence, all the young women of the household, married or unmarried, are removed elsewhere, but such as are above the fixed age of thirty are suffered to remain, though even in these cases I note that I am seldom left alone with women, no matter what their age. No doubt the female mind, so strongly imbued in childhood with the inherent mystical terrors of their monarch, still shrinks with awe from too close proximity with such a force of potential danger. Possibly, however, I may err on this point, and in reality some ancient notion of etiquette unknown to me is being served by this

noticeable self-effacement on the part of the older women. Of course, the deference wherewith I am treated by the male folk is intensified in the case of the ladies, who regard me much in the same light that a bigoted Catholic would regard a tangible apparition of St Peter or St Paul in their houses.

Politically, women possess no rights, but then no more do the men, except the handful who compose the executive council, so they cannot well complain of invidious treatment on this score, even were they anxious to discover grievances of sex. As with the historic Prussian queen, their empire admittedly lies in the nursery, for all children are completely under the charge of their mothers according to immemorial custom. In the nobility the tacit law seems to be that the man is master outside the house, whilst the woman is mistress within doors; and this maxim is generally acted upon throughout all spheres of social life. Women are exempt from the poll-tax, which is levied on all males, and indeed no taxes are exacted from women at all, except in the rare and transitory instances of unmarried heiresses of landed estates. Whether or no, vague, restless, unsatisfied aspirations and longings occasionally assail the minds of some of the younger men I cannot say for certain; but I do feel sure that the womanhood of Meleager is absolutely satisfied with its present lot and cannot so much as conceive of any betterment of existing conditions. The conversations I have had with the wives or sisters

of my hosts at different times were usually of a rather stilted and uninteresting nature; but I never failed to note their supreme content and buoyant cheerfulness.

Nevertheless, although women have never been admitted into the ranks of the hierarchy, and presumably never will be, yet they possess a species of council of their own sex in the college of the priestesses of the Sun, who inhabit a large block of buildings contiguous to the great temple. This institution is based on rules somewhat similar to those which prevail in the Council of the Seventy, but it is worked and administered on broader lines, and the age limit is not so strictly drawn as in the case of the hierarchy. Girls who have no desire or vocation for matrimony may enter the portals of this convent (if I may so term it) as novices; nor is the acceptance of applicants confined to one social class, as is the rule concerning the probationers of the hierarchy. On the contrary, a fair proportion of the inmates of this convent are drawn from the middle and lower classes, and thus the atmosphere of the convent is of a distinctly democratic type. Even the highest office of all, that of Domina, or lady abbess, is occasionally attained by a plebeian, for the rules of election here are carefully compiled so as to secure the choice of the most popular and capable of the candidates. The senior ladies of the convent are kept in constant touch with the members of the council, who frequently apply to the

priestesses of the Sun for advice in various matters of a social and remedial nature, which may be deemed expedient. Thus all regulations concerning the welfare of women and children have been carefully scrutinised and approved by the Domina and her assessors before ever they are enforced by the officials of the council. But how closely and on what lines the temple and the convent work together is of course beyond my knowledge, though it is evident that the two institutions are conducted in apparent harmony with one another.

XI

It is scarcely fair to offer any comparison between the moral progress as shown in Meleager and that prevailing on the Earth, and in any case such a comparison would prove impossible, seeing how varied and how complex are the many moral systems of the greater planet. With our numerous nationalities it is only logical there should result great diversities of opinion on ethics, and we are made to realise our difficulty in estimating any average sum-total of earthly morals to bring into the field of comparison. Has not one writer of note averred that the views of sexual morality held by the phallic worshippers of old and by the extreme Puritans of to-day rest equally on a common religious foundation? And has not our British poet of empire somewhere written that

"The wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Khatmandù,
And the crimes of Clapham chaste in Martaban"?

In the instance of my own kingdom the many defunct and surviving systems of the nations of the Earth have all been studied and have doubtless been partially adapted here and there, so that in a sense the Meleagrian outlook on morals is extremely interesting, as affording the result of careful un-

prejudiced investigation over a wide space of time. But of course the outcome of these secret researches and deductions cannot possibly be agreeable or obvious to any one people or set of thinkers on Earth, for it will be remembered that whereas the Earth is a congeries of tribes and climates and faiths, so Meleager is homogeneous, unless one takes into account the colder and almost unexplored parts of Barbaria. And thus, as the consequence of careful study for many, many generations by acute well-trained intellects, a sort of eclecticism has been created here in the field of morals, as has already arisen in the case of religious tenets.

Here there are no hard and fast rules on moral behaviour, but each individual is supposed to be guided by his or her instincts, which it is considered expedient to depress or encourage, according to the benefit or damage that may accrue thereby to society at large, or to the state, if you prefer to regard it as such. The open exhibition of harmful instincts then is looked on by the ruling caste of Meleager as an occasion not for punishment but for segregation; such tendencies in themselves being disregarded so long as they are practised in secret and kept, as it were, under personal control. And here I am speaking only of traits and tendencies, not of actual crimes, of fraud or violence, for the punishment of which there exists a severe code based apparently on the Mosaic laws. A cold-blooded murder is repaid by a death penalty, which is

carried out privately in the case of a nobleman, by beheadal in prison of a merchant, and by public hanging in the case of a plebeian. Crimes of assault are met with strokes from the lash coupled with a fine; outrages on children are punished by death. But vile crimes and executions are very rare indeed, and this highly desirable state of things I attribute to the long period wherein the rulers of Meleager have been gradually eliminating the feeble-minded and evil-disposed members of the community by their careful and judicious system of segregation. Other cases of wrong-doing of a more venial type are usually met by a scale of fines, which are intended to compensate the injured party for any damage he may have incurred; whilst minor instances of violence or disturbance of the peace are frequently punished by an order to administer a certain number of lashes there and then in open court, this penalty being not uncommonly awarded to drunken or refractory persons belonging to the seafaring, peddling, long-shore and such humbler sections of the populace.

Thanks again to the past measures taken to repress crime and to ensure good behaviour, the physical health of the kingdom leaves almost nothing to be desired. Epidemic diseases are practically unknown, as are also contagious venereal maladies. It is the constant, and possibly rather trying and officious, visitations made by the sanitary inspectors into every homestead, small or great, patrician or

plebeian, which have doubtless helped to induce this highly commendable condition of affairs. Disease and dirt are the two evils which are attacked without rest or mercy by the councillors appointed for their control, and by their equally energetic representatives. Cleanliness is not reckoned as next to godliness in Meleager; it is an inherent part of religion itself, and hygienic regulations are perpetually being enforced upon what is now become a willing, though no doubt in past times it was an unwilling, population. I suppose many English Puritans would look askance at the thermal establishments which exist both in the cities and in the rural districts, seeing that the two sexes have here opportunities of studying one another in a nude state; but then, as I have said before, Meleagrian morals do not exist for morality's sake, but have evidently been framed for the special purpose of securing a healthy vigorous race. Early marriage is encouraged, but, paradoxical as it may appear, large families are not considered desirable; whilst there is a curious custom which permits of a husband no longer cohabiting with his wife after she has borne him three children living. I have heard that this eccentric, and no doubt to many offensive, notion also prevails in the upper ranks of the civilised Latin races, though possibly my informant may have been mistaken in his statement. I gather that such a tacit understanding has its origin in the fear of over-population, and certainly

the limited land surface of Meleager possessing a desirable climate may plead as a reasonable excuse for the holding of this whimsical tenet, which seems to savour of the school of Malthus. Apparently the growth of population in Meleager is somewhat analogous to that of modern France, and seeing the high place in which French philosophy and culture are held by the leading nations of the Earth, the Meleagrians are at least erring in good company.

Turning to the coarser side of the question of public morals, prostitution exists, but neither to a great extent nor openly. Those who can recall the nocturnal conditions of the main London thoroughfares during the latter part of Queen Victoria's reign would be agreeably surprised to detect no outward flaunting of vice after dusk in the streets of Tamarida; and the least tendency to riot or disturbance is promptly quelled by the military patrols. Not that licence and debauchery do not abound, for there are, I believe, plenty of resorts of a certain class in the towns; but the doings of such places do not rise to the surface, and those who frequent them dare not offend the quiet of their neighbours.

Meanwhile the priestesses of the Sun are constantly busied with the ultimate fate of the harlot, and their emissaries are often engaged in reclaiming girls from a licentious career and in training them to become useful wives, for such early lapses are held lightly by the mass of the people. And in not a few instances these "*filles de joie*" become wedded

to their paramours, and make good mothers. Such an outlook is of course utterly unmoral to large sections of the civilised and Christianised nations of Europe and America; but the Meleagrian view is shared by many other races of the Earth who have enjoyed a longer and perhaps a better record of civilisation than have these complacent modern nations whose ancestors were half-naked savages in the days of the Roman Empire. Universal chastity, in short, is a feature almost exclusively confined to northern tribes of barbarians, for whom it has great natural advantages certainly, for it tends to breed a hardy and prolific race. But I do not think it can be classed as a genuine virtue in itself, and it always tends promptly to disappear the moment the trammels of education and development are assumed. Now the Meleagrians can lay claim to be an intensely civilised race, whereby I mean their rulers have been engaged in the study of the arts of peace and progress for many centuries, and have consequently left behind them the old barbarian necessity for absolute chastity, though they still recognise its value as a wholesome ingredient of married family life. For with marriage chastity in their eyes takes on another aspect, which must not be confounded with the former, and that is faithfulness. A faithless wife is very rare indeed in Meleager, and her treatment at the hands of her neighbours is not enviable.

XII

Religion has already entered so significantly into my narrative that I feel I must apologise for a special dissertation on this subject. Yet I have never so far described the exact nature or scope of the Meleagrian faith which may be said to permeate and regulate the whole private and public existence of the people.

The inhabitants of Meleager—and in the ensuing statements, of course, I always except the hierarchy—are worshippers of the Sun, who is their sole deity. He is visible to them for a large portion of almost each day; he is tangible, in so far as they can feel the warmth of his beams; he is alive and in constant motion, as they watch him "ride the heavens like a horse" and disappear into the waters of the western sea only to uprear again next morning above the eastern horizon. As in the old Greek mythos, the Sun is popularly supposed to drive his golden chariot with its flaming wheels and with its yoke of fretting stallions across the dome of heaven, till finally god and car alike pass over the containing rim of the Meleagrian world. Below the flat surface of the land and sea the Sun-god inhabits a vast palace, whose splendours far exceed anything known to men. Here he rests after his daily labours

amongst his numerous progeny, and refreshes himself after his late exertions undertaken solely for the benefit of the favoured race, that in the illimitable past he created in his own image. The firmament is his field of action; the space below the ground is his haven of retirement. At night the dome of heaven shorn of his effulgent presence is lighted only by the sparkling stars; "jewels of the Sun," as they are termed in Meleagrian parlance; or else the great vacant arc is illumined by the sickly lustre of the Moon. For the Moon stands to the Meleagrian mind, as it did largely to the antique and mediæval imagination, for all that is uncanny and malign. Few Meleagrians will walk abroad in clear moonlight, if they can reasonably avoid so doing; and in the many tales and legends that are current the Moon in her various phases and with her evil influence always occupies a prominent place. The oldest legend concerning the Moon, that is a legend parallel with such theories as the origin of the rainbow or the story of the Ark on Mount Ararat of the Jewish Pentateuch, relates how in the days of chaos there were two Suns, rivals, who fought one another for the possession of the beautiful world of Meleager; and that after a titanic combat, wherein the heavens thundered and the mountains belched forth fire and smoke, and the waters tossed and hissed furiously, the benign Sun conquered and slew the opposing deity, whose dead body still floats abroad in the sky, wherein it serves as an eternal

trophy to the prowess of the victor. In the popular imagination however the corpse of the vanquished Moon is not wholly impotent for ill. A scintilla of mischievous vitality is still believed to lurk in its form, during the hours of the night, what time the Sun himself is absent from the heavens. The average Meleagrian therefore has a peculiar dread of the night, and of a moonlit night in a special degree. The practice of magic, both of the black and white types, is fairly common in all ranks of Meleagrian society, and its preparations and philtres are always popularly associated with the period of the Moon's fulness, when that deity's surviving spark of life is deemed most active.

The cult of the Meleagrians for the Sun not only recognises his vital warmth and fructifying properties, but also attributes to him the gathering or dispersal of the clouds which drop the refreshing rain upon the thirsty soil and swell the opening buds of tree and plant. The winds are also under the Sun's control, and are apparently regarded as his offspring, who sometimes disobey their august parent's injunctions, and either sportively or maliciously vex the people of Meleager with unwelcome gales that imperil the fisher-folk at sea, and injure the springing crops on land. But speaking broadly, the Meleagrian is of St James's opinion that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of Lights with whom is no variableness neither shadow of turning."

And in truth the unchangeable benignity and faithfulness of the Sun-god are so evident to his people that one can scarcely wonder at their fixed belief in his omnipresent power for good, and at his unsullied reputation of their sole benefactor.

The scheme of public and private worship has evidently been modelled on features found in Pagan, Mohammedan and Christian religious systems. The brief prayer to the Sun's majesty, which I have quoted elsewhere, that is uttered by all on their knees at the hours of sunrise and sunset, savours in principle of the terse invocations to Allah, deemed by Mahomet as most suitable to the human temperament and understanding. On the other hand, the weekly obligatory holiday derives probably from Jewish tradition. Again, the elaborate ceremonies held annually in the principal temple whereat the King offers incense in public at the crystal altar of the Sun seem to recall the mediæval pageants of the Roman Church, though possibly they may be copied from much older forms of worship on the Earth. But in contrast with these strictly spiritual forms, it is noteworthy that the occasions of births, deaths and marriages are treated in a civilian spirit, if I may so express it. Births are merely registered or reported to the appointed members of the council or their itinerant officials; marriage is almost wholly a betrothal within the family circle, and consists of an exchange of rings

between the bride and bridegroom in the presence of their respective relations. Death is accompanied with small display of ceremony. Cremation is compulsory here, and after the corpse has been duly prepared, a pyre is made either in the garden of the deceased's home or else in a public enclosure utilised for the purpose. In aristocratic or wealthy families the ashes are generally preserved within the family chapel or mausoleum; those who are poor or indifferent merely leave the little urn in the public columbarium. There are regular charges by the Government for the performance of cremation, varying with the opulence or poverty of the family applying. Death is never attended with any demonstration of woe or wailing, or indeed by any sort of openly expressed mourning, except in the case of widows and orphans, who usually hold themselves in retirement for a month or so after the event. To mourn loudly or to give vent to excessive grief is regarded as ill-bred, at any rate in the upper classes, as also indicating the fear lest the departed one may not through his life have earned the full benefits of the Hereafter, which is the due reward of every well-behaved citizen. Of course, genuine sorrow and desolation are not scorned or mocked; such feelings are respected by those outside, but it is the custom and aim of the Meleagrians to conceal their feelings as assiduously as possible; and indeed to hide a stricken heart under a smiling face is accounted no small virtue in itself,

and in the nobility a necessary proof of gentle manners.

Death is universally regarded as the portal to another life, which may be either material in the form of a reincarnation on the planet itself, or of a spiritual or higher phase of existence in the mystical realm of the Sun-god. In any case, it is held that the continuity of personal existence is not interrupted by the accident of death, though there is no definite opinion or belief as to the nature of the new life that succeeds. Having no literature in print or script, naturally all such theories of the Hereafter are very nebulous, so that numerous views as to the nature of the future life are held, though all such views are variable rather than contradictory or combative. Thus many aver that the Meleagrian never really dies, but that a death in one spot merely connotes a birth in another; and that the individual is born again and again, each time into a different social sphere, till finally he becomes a member of the hierarchy, whose priests when they expire are absorbed directly into the family of the Sun-god.

And here I may state that, paradoxical though it may appear, the theory of the Hereafter is apparently held as firmly by the hierarchy as by the people at large. Of course the opinions of these enlightened persons differ fundamentally from those of the ignorant mass of the Meleagrians, whose easy-going theory of transmigration of soul, or rather of vital

personality, is naturally repugnant and absurd to their educated minds. Their aspirations are necessarily more lofty, though what their actual fixed belief is I cannot tell, and I much doubt whether any member of the hierarchy could explain it satisfactorily himself. For these councillors have full cognizance of all the faiths and creeds, to say nothing of the numerous forms of unfaith and philosophic doubt, that flourish on our Earth, to guide or hinder them in their choice of a definite religion; yet I am assured, and I believe the assurance, they all cling to the belief of the Hereafter in spite of the knowledge of their own Great Imposture and their close acquaintance with terrestrial ethics. Probably the simple but precise religious education of their childhood produces a mental soil wherein agnosticism and infidelity positively refuse to take root and flourish; and though they must have received a most painful rebuff in the total destruction of their early religious teaching, yet their minds are so attuned thereby that they merely cast about with more or less success to find some suitable theory or form of belief that will fill the aching void created by the recent revelation of The Secret and all that it implies. That any one of them has actually been converted to any Herthian creed, I very gravely doubt. From generation to generation for some two thousand years these councillors have watched so many prophets and messiahs arise in all corners of our Earth, and again they have

noted the beginning, the rise, the zenith, the decline and the extinction of so many cults;—how can they possibly assert which is or was the genuine form of belief? Their conclusions, if conclusions they can be called, remain as a sealed book to me; and though I have taken part in many arguments on this weighty subject with the Arch-priest and also with other members of the hierarchy, I shall never really catch a firm grip of this elusive religious *fata morgana* of the Meleagrian intellectuals. In one important respect however I have learned that the councillors are pretty unanimous—namely, in extolling the expressed opinion of St Paul that the blessing of the Hereafter is not necessarily an inalienable gift to man. "The wages of sin is death," and "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?" are, I know, maxims that are admitted and approved by these all-knowing members of the hierarchy. Sin, they hold, is any disobedience or treachery in connection with their sacred trust of ruling the people of Meleager for their own good; and the failure or omission to perform plain duty brings its own punishment in the shape of Death, not the casual death of the body but a complete blotting out and annihilation of the soul, the termination of progressive personality both now and for ever. This view of their responsibilities acts as a warning voice in the ear of each councillor, who may ever be tempted to a possible betrayal of his trust either towards his own order or towards

the Meleagrian people; and it is perhaps this sense of an automatic obliterating Nemesis that makes the elaborate machine of Meleagrian state craft work so smoothly in the hands of those who are alike strictly accountable both as rulers and servants of the community.

XIII

Although I have described the three estates of the realm as being clearly delineated by their social boundaries, yet there is one element of union betwixt them all that I have so far left unnoticed. This I may call the intellectual bond that in some degree seems to weld together these three well-defined classes. There is, of course, no literature in the accepted term amongst the Meleagrians, for they own neither books nor manuscripts, the power to read and write being vested solely in the educated hierarchy. On the other hand, the brains of the people are at least as quick and comprehensive as are those of Earth-dwellers, whilst the tenacity of memory in the more gifted individuals is amazing. In our English life, even in this generation of compulsory popular education, it is no uncommon thing to meet with persons in the humbler ranks of society who despite all these modern boasted advantages have for one reason or another failed to acquire or to remember the arts of reading and writing. Some proportion of such illiterates is undoubtedly of inferior mentality, but a large fraction also consists of persons whose minds are conspicuously acute and retentive. Again and again when on the Earth have I been struck by the marked ability of invention and memory displayed by certain individuals

who cannot decipher a journal nor write a letter. On the other hand, the mass of the semi-educated, who are all voracious readers of the trashy or unwholesome printed stuff of the present time, are appallingly, hopelessly ignorant of all things that are worth learning or remembering. In Meleager, with its literary limitations, intellect is shown not in a smattering of ill-digested education, but in natural taste, in the exercise of memory, and in exceptional powers of invention. One reads in works belonging to the past of the *improvvisatori* of Italy, of the bards of mediæval Wales, of the minnesinger of Germany, of the troubadours of Provence, and it is this obsolete type of self-culture that dominates and guides the aspiring Meleagrian mind. There exists hardly a family or household in each estate that does not possess at least one member who is born with a definite taste or instinct for mental prowess, which is shown in his capacity to learn and retain in youth the myths or poems repeated to him by his elders. From these early and simple efforts of the mind such an one passes to the higher plane of invention and of composition. A stripling so endowed is almost always persuaded to persevere; his tales or verses are listened to and discussed with all seriousness by his friends and family; and if his efforts come to find favour he may by degrees win a reputation that will tend to spread. The popular class in particular produces many such orators, whether they declaim original

matter or the works of others. These persons are in frequent demand at all gatherings in their immediate circle, whilst a certain proportion of them are able to obtain a wider notoriety and to gain their living from the fees they receive for their powers of entertainment. In these successful instances the poet or entertainer, if he be of humble origin, will often be invited to appear and recite in the houses of his superiors; and if his good luck or genuine talents lead him yet further, it is not unlikely he may eventually, if he be so minded, obtain a species of social adoption into a higher sphere than that of his birth. It is no very uncommon thing for an *improvvisatore* so endowed to be finally elected into the estate of the nobility, and to be allowed the use of the crimson robe, though such a privilege is never extended to his wife or family. Having once attained to this eminence, in spite of his plebeian origin he is of course eligible to be entered as a neophyte, which is the first step towards ultimate admission to the ranks of the hierarchy.

This then is the ladder that has occasionally assisted certain naturally gifted members of the lower social orders to ascend even to the council of state; thus it is that the intellectual cream of the Meleagrian populace is enabled to rise to the surface. No doubt the proportion of plebeians in that exclusive assembly is very small; still such a consummation is shown to be not wholly unattainable, and the hope of so exalted an honour, however

remote and improbable, acts as a spur to such persons of the middle and lower classes as own exceptional abilities and possess the ambition to serve their country in this wise.

Meleagrian poetry, to which I am of necessity or politeness compelled to sit a constant listener, seems to me to be at least on a level with that of my former country; whilst the tales, be they amorous, didactic, gruesome or comical, are often delightful in themselves and are moreover always related with a charm and restraint of manner that might well be adopted by our own professional lecturers who have the backing of innumerable libraries behind them. There is in fact an enormous quantity of what I may call floating unwritten literature of considerable value; for any tale or poem which happens to hit the taste of an audience soon becomes public property, and is learned by rote and repeated by other less successful orators, so that the author's fame becomes widespread. I have only to add that the ear, the wit and the memory of this illiterate race are all so delicately adjusted and attuned that it is no easy matter for the average would-be entertainer to acquire popularity and high recompense in his self-chosen profession. It is only a very few who rise to general esteem and to high honour and affluence; whilst of the others a large proportion are content to cultivate a good method and modest style of recitation, and only to declaim the works of such as have already attained a definite celebrity.

XIV

. . . . . .

Since I wrote these pages I have met with an extraordinary but most fortunate experience, which I have been able to turn to my own profit with regard to the safe delivery of my manuscript. I shall relate the circumstances as briefly as I can, for I have not overmuch space left on this scroll, and I find my message must be limited to one piece.

Yesterday, being the holiday of the week, I rode out a-hunting with Hiridia and other members of my Court amid the hilly region of forest that lies behind the city. We were engaged in hotly pursuing a wounded doe, and in the course of our chase came upon a wide open plateau in the midst of the woods. Across this we all galloped, and my mount being far fleeter than those of my companions, I soon outstripped them all and rushed forward into the forest beyond. I am not usually very intent on hounding down a stricken animal, but on this occasion I continued to charge wildly ahead, dodging the many trunks and branches in a manner that would have done credit to a colonial Bushman. The hot lust of the chase for once fired my blood, and I felt the true afflatus of the eager sportsman in my brain, as I tore madly onward, recking

nothing of the surrounding danger or the possibility of getting lost. Suddenly I was stopped in my headlong career by the bough of a tree striking me full across the breast with considerable force. A quick struggle to retain my saddle and stirrups, an unusually fierce plunge from my excited horse, and a moment later I found myself clinging with both arms to the opposing branch with my steed escaping from under me. I watched his quarters disappear into the enveloping scrub, and for a few seconds could distinguish the crackling sound of his tearing through the undergrowth till all was silent. I now dropped cautiously to the ground below, where I found myself none the worse for my misadventure, save for a few scratches and bruises. My plight, if disagreeable and untimely, was not in the least fraught with danger, for I was sure to be sought and discovered by my comrades at any rate before many hours could pass. I felt however no inclination to lie quietly where I had fallen, so I decided to retrace my steps in the direction whither I imagined my friends to be approaching. So I rose and began guessing my way by means of the broken twigs and trampled grass caused by my horse's late gallop in the forest. But I must evidently have soon strayed from the desired direction, for after a time I lighted upon a well-defined track or pad, such as used to be familiar to me in the Australian bush; and thinking this track would certainly lead me towards some habitation, I followed its meanderings

beneath the tall trees, whose leafy heads served to exclude a good deal of the waning afternoon light. Having threaded this little path for no small distance I suddenly found it emerge from the woodlands into a charming secluded little valley, watered by a clear purling stream trickling through bright green pastures that were thickly set with masses of the fragrant yellow narcissus. Beyond the brook and facing me stood a house of some size, recalling one of the mysterious Algerian *koubbas* with its plain white-washed walls and its low cupolas. I hastened forward with the intention of demanding assistance, and had already leaped the narrow stream and was ankle-deep amongst the perfumed yellow blossoms, when I caught sight of a figure in long white draperies seated in a chair that was set on the usual low gallery outside the house. As I drew near enough to distinguish the man's countenance, I was seized with a sudden spasm of intense astonishment, for the white-robed senator sitting there full in the golden light of the setting sun was no other than my old acquaintance on Earth—Arrigo d'Aragno!

But if real surprise were manifested (as I have no doubt must have been the case) on my own visage, I am sure I never saw terror, genuine abject terror, ever depicted so plainly on any face before. Some hideous apparition or the sudden realisation of an impending doom could alone have produced that look on any countenance. D'Aragno's complexion turned ashy-grey, his thick lower lip fell, his eyes

took on a glassy stare, as they surveyed my approaching form; yet so stupefied was the poor man from shock that he was obviously unable to arouse himself. Naturally, I was the quicker to recover from the effects of this unexpected meeting, and with a voice fairly well under control I merely remarked in English: "Have you no word of greeting, Signor d'Aragno, for your King, who stands in some slight need of your help?" My words seem to have brought the required force to break the spell of temporary paralysis, for the poor fellow, half-rising from his seat, began to blurt out some incoherent sentences. I drew still nearer, and my advance, whilst certainly increasing his horror, at least served to render d'Aragno more active in his movements, for hurriedly bestirring himself and casting a furtive look round the peaceful empty scene, he motioned to me to enter the house by an open doorway just behind his chair. When we were both inside the room, he hurriedly bolted the door, and then sank utterly exhausted on to a couch, whereon I feared for a moment he was about to indulge in a prolonged, or perhaps even a fatal, fainting fit. Presently however, to my relief, he exhibited signs of recovery, whilst I stood motionless at a little distance from him, patiently waiting for him to speak and feeling to my intense inward satisfaction that somehow or other I had in this unsought and unexpected interview the advantage over my late captor on Earth.

"Why, why have you entered my house? How have you managed to find me? Who can have told you of my whereabouts?" Such were the first questions the prostrate d'Aragno contrived to hiss out from his swollen purple lips. But I continued to maintain my calm not to say haughty attitude, and thus allowed the unhappy councillor for some time longer to imagine that I had found my way hither with the special purpose of his discomfiture, for from his confused and disjointed ejaculations I grew quickly to comprehend that our strange encounter was liable to prove a fatal catastrophe for him, d'Aragno. After keeping silence thus for several minutes, with a contemptuous smile of amusement and pity, I told him of my accident out hunting and how I had wandered hither by the merest chance. My statements seemed at first slightly to mollify his alarm, but an instant later he was again in contortions of renewed terror lest my comrades should trace me to this spot and report the matter to the hierarchy. I began to grow impatient and rather angry with this unedifying exhibition of selfish cowardice, so I spoke at last sharply to the agonised senator. But I need not trouble my readers with a detailed account of our lengthy conversation, beyond that its salient points were these, and very interesting they were to me. It seems that d'Aragno did accompany me in my strange aerial voyage to Meleager, which terminated (as I had so often expected) at the

temple on Mount Crystal. From that time up till the present moment he had been living in strict retirement in this remote sequestered valley, in accordance with the inexorable rule of the hierarchy, which positively forbids under pain of immediate death any meeting or communication whatsoever between the Earth-born King of Meleager and the envoy who has selected him for that royal office. And now in truth a deadly bolt had fallen out of the blue into the quiet existence which d'Aragno looked to enjoy for the remainder of his days in this pleasant place of hiding. I could not repress some qualms of sympathy for my unwilling host; still, such feelings were not a little tempered by the secret sense of gratified vengeance, when I reflected on the dictatorial advice and threatening attitude of which I had had experience some few years ago in London. However I brushed aside my rancour, and assuming a cheerful countenance I patted the lamenting senator familiarly on the back, bidding him take courage, as my courtiers were not likely to seek me in his house, and even if perchance they did come this way, what was to prevent the concealment of my presence here? So we fell to less dismal discourse, and likewise to food, for I was very hungry and insisted on my host supplying me with a substantial meal, which he fetched himself. I sate down to eat with a good appetite, the while poor d'Aragno, too agitated to ply a knife and fork, watched me do justice to the cold meats, rolls, fruits and

excellent home-grown wine he had placed before me.

During this time d'Aragno gave me information on several points that had hitherto puzzled me. I learned from him that the Meleagrians always keep two ambassadors on the Earth, who are replaced from time to time, and need nevermore repeat their excursion thither. I also gathered—indirectly, it is true, for d'Aragno was discreet to the verge of obstinacy—that constant intercommunication is maintained between their envoys on the Earth and the hierarchy in Meleager by means of crystal-gazing globes, whose properties allow of a code of signalling, no matter what the intervening space may be. Possibly there are other sources of mutual information between the two planets, but this use of crystal-gazing I conclude to be one of their principal means employed. On the subject of my own levitation or conveyance whilst in an unconscious state to Meleager, d'Aragno simply pursed his lips and steadfastly refused to reply; so seeing any attempt on this head would prove idle, I finally turned the conversation. In the matter of his own position and safety in Meleager, my host was more communicative. He was, he said, treated with the greatest distinction by the whole hierarchy, with whom he was in constant touch, by means of a subterranean passage running from his chosen place of retirement to the Temple of the Sun in Tamarida. He assisted at all the more important meetings of the

inner ring of the council, and was frequently visited by members of the hierarchy in his country home. Nevertheless, this sword of Damocles, in the shape of the ancient stern enactment, ever hung above his honoured head, should he by any evil chance, such as the present, come into personal contact with the monarch he had himself enticed and brought to reign in Meleager. Any collusion or meeting, so he informed me, between these two personages, was if discovered to be followed by the immediate death of the hapless envoy, no matter how innocent he might be, nor how accidental and unforeseen his encounter with the Child of the Sun. This death penalty was a fundamental law, which could never be broken nor abrogated. I suppose the very notion of a combination between these two persons seemed so fraught with danger to the state as to have been the original cause of so savage and sweeping an edict. No wonder then that poor d'Aragno, who was obviously in no hurry to terminate his quiet but highly agreeable evening of life, seemed overwhelmed with fear at the unlooked-for apparition of myself. I perceived a distinct cooling of my recent dislike towards him as he proceeded to tell me of the pleasant years he hoped to spend in this delicious retreat, where he was served by attendants who were deaf and dumb. He showed me with affectionate pride the many rolls of manuscript filled by his own pen with choice passages from our worldly authors that had lain

embedded in his marvellous and highly trained memory, which he daily continued to transcribe. With a sly expression he also rose and slid aside a panel of the wall, revealing within a small space, that sheltered about a dozen tiny volumes of printed matter, which (so I conjectured) he had brought away with him from the Earth hidden on his person to his final destination. These consisted chiefly of English and Italian classics, and amongst their number I can recall the Shakespearean Plays, the Essays of Montaigne and Bacon, the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, the *Faust* of Goethe and the *Travels of Gulliver*. These books were of very small size and of such minute print that their owner confessed they required to be studied through a magnifying glass. For a moment I paused to wonder whether these treasures were ever produced in the presence of any of those white-robed brethren of the council who were in the habit of paying d'Aragno visits in his home of honourable exile. Nor could I resist asking d'Aragno, as I fingered these mementoes of his sojourn on our Earth, whether he had included in his library any of my own works, seeing how extravagantly he had praised them during our interviews in London; but my host gravely shook his head, for a sense of humour is rather rare amongst the more exalted members of the hierarchy.

At length I came to business, the business I stoutly intended to transact ere ever I quitted this secluded house, the business which a lucky chance had thrown

in my way towards a possible fulfilment of my present desire. "And now," began I, "Signor d'Aragno, for I know you by no other title, pray what return do you propose to render me, if I do not immediately on my arrival at Tamarida inform the Arch-priest of this delightful but altogether informal meeting between us?" My hearer's fat face waxed pale and puffy as he almost cringed before me at the bare thought of the possibility of such a catastrophe. "What is your wish?" proceeded as a hoarse whisper from between his bloodless lips. I thereupon set to explain to him the exact nature of the boon I demanded—namely, the safe transmission of my message to Earth; and I also declared to him that it was the ambition to overcome what all the wiseacres of our planet would deem insuperable that largely prompted my intention. At first d'Aragno's face betokened blank dismay at my request, yet when I went on to tell him that I had no wish for my packet to be delivered to any particular individual, but that I was fully content for it to be deposited on the Earth's surface, provided only it were dropped on dry land, he assumed a less despondent bearing.

After a pause for meditation d'Aragno replied: "Your scheme is not altogether incapable of accomplishment, for I who brought you hither own at least the means of conveying an object of moderate compass to your Earth. I am implicitly trusted here, and as to any missive I may care to dispatch

to Earth no question will be asked, and it will be sent on the next occasion. But remember, I can only undertake to do this once, and once for all. If therefore you will hand over to me your manuscript, written closely as you will but confined within one solitary sheet of our vellum, I will engage to have it conveyed whither you ask. You, however, on your part must swear never to divulge the incident of our chance encounter to-day, and for this mutual exchange of oaths it is expedient for us both to have recourse to the Meleagrian formula in its most solemn aspect. And I must notify you here that we in Meleager are all believers in the Hereafter, which we hold is arranged for us according to our merits in this our present life. We all (and I am no exception) build much on the Hereafter, albeit we may seem overmuch attached to life itself; we therefore dread the forfeiture of our future prospects in the mysterious world to come, however uncertain we may feel of their precise nature or degree. Now we hold also that the breaking of a formal oath of special sanctity on the part of a councillor of Meleager of itself brings this punishment or disability in its train, so by binding myself by this most sacred rite I run the risk of losing what I deem of intense value—namely, every chance of spiritual growth in the Hereafter. You, on your side, must also perform your share of the contract faithfully, and for that joint purpose I now propose that we two participate in the sacred

act of an interchange of oaths. Have I your consent to this ? "

I agreed, being anxious to learn the nature of this solemn binding covenant, whose rupture is regarded as the prelude to such serious spiritual losses and disadvantages. I therefore closely watched d'Aragno busy himself with the necessary preliminaries. First he fetched a vase of gold into which he stuck a few thin rods, that he subsequently lighted to the accompaniment of a prayer, whereupon a strong aromatic odour began to pervade the room. He then bade me stand opposite to him and at the same time bend over the vase so that we obtained the benefit of the pungent incense smoke full in our nostrils. He next clasped both my hands in his, entwining our respective fingers, and then pressed his forehead against mine. This attitude, however sacrosanct and traditional, rather tickled my natural propensity to mirth, as I noted the incongruity in this close semi-embrace between my own six feet four inches and squat d'Aragno's five feet and little over. Nothing however in this pose seemed to strike my host in a humorous light, for he continued with the most serious expression to clutch me with all his force till the drops of sweat were pouring from his face. Meantime he kept muttering prayers or threats with ceaseless energy in an undertone, until, when I myself was almost wearied out with my stiff and stooping attitude, he suddenly with a final burst of imprecation snatched

the burning incense sticks from the vase and trampled them vigorously underfoot till they had ceased to smoke. The compact, or rite, or oath was now completed, so that we were mutually bound, I to the strictest secrecy and silence, and he to the task of dispatching my scroll of manuscript to Earth. D'Aragno now unfolded his plan of campaign to me. "In your own private garden at the palace," said he; "beneath a group of seven tall palms stands a marble seat where I am told you are often in the habit of sitting in meditation. Behind that same seat is a flagstone of the paved terrace which has a copper ring inset. Bring your piece of parchment concealed in your mantle to this spot when there will be none to observe your actions, for the palace spies do not penetrate thither. Pull up the ring, which will yield easily to your effort, and then throw down the scroll into the hollow that exists beneath. That is all, but see that you do this on the seventh day from to-day between the sixth and seventh hours. I shall be waiting in the gallery below, which ramifies from the underground passage that connects the temple with my place of retreat. For three days in succession I shall come to this spot below the marble bench; but if by the third day no scroll is thrown down to me, I shall deem myself absolved of my oath, for I dare not attend thus more than three days running. But you may rely on my punctuality and good faith. Having duly obtained

your scroll, I shall encase it in a metal cylinder and it shall then be transmitted to Earth on the first opportunity, which ought to occur within the next few weeks. The case with your manuscript enclosed will be dropped in some lonely place inland, where it may or may not be ultimately discovered, brought to a civilised city, deciphered, studied, discussed and published. For myself, I fail to grasp your evident sense of satisfaction in so trivial and futile a scheme; but it is clear you are obstinately bent on your purpose, and by my recent oath I am bound under the severest spiritual penalties to aid you. Yet who on your Earth will ever be found to believe in your fantastic story? And even if it were held worthy of credence, of what value would it prove to your fellow-men? Or again, what possible tittle of benefit would you gain by stirring up Herthian interest in this account of your adventures in Meleager?" And d'Aragno's face for a moment took on the quizzical yet imperious look I had noted when he was addressing me at length in the parlour of the great London hotel some five years ago.

By this time darkness had fallen outside, and this circumstance now urged my host to speed my departure. Quickly leaving the house in the obscurity of the encroaching nightfall, together we crossed the glen with its murmuring brook, and scaled the opposite bank to enter the depths of the enclosing forest. Following a rough path we advanced for some time without exchanging a word,

till at last we debouched into a wide open space where we halted. The sharp dewy freshness of the night air was now upon us, whilst the hooting of distant owls and other nocturnal sounds filled our ears, as we stood gazing into the dark blue vault overhead. The stars glistened with the peculiar brilliance associated with a touch of frost, and shining above the tree-tops was a conspicuous planet far surpassing its companion stars in size and lustre. D'Aragno paused, and pointing towards the ascending orb quietly informed me it was the Earth, my old domicile; and somehow this piece of information caused in me an indefinable thrill, so that I could not repress a slight shiver, as I fixed my eyes on my far-away abandoned home. At the same time a curious tale of my childhood leaped, as it were, into my memory, for I began to understand with a greater clarity than ever before the extraordinary nature of the fate that had befallen me.

I recalled the story, the conceit of a long-forgotten evangelical writer whose works were popular with my parents, of how a certain inhabitant of the Evening Star was so struck by the surpassing beauty of the planet we call the Earth that he prayed to his Deity for permission to visit this unknown world. His entreaty was granted, but upon one condition —namely, that on his being translated thither he should never return, but should share in whatever conditions and laws of existence might prevail on

the star of his choice. He eagerly consented to this pact, so overwhelming was his desire or his curiosity; and falling into a deep slumber he was transported (much as I had myself been conveyed) to his elected sphere, wherein he awoke to find himself in an ancient city of the Levant. The strange visitor was well received by the reigning sultan and the citizens of the place, who did all that lay in their power to make life pleasant for their interesting guest, whose unique story they thoroughly believed. Time sped by agreeably enough amid these novel surroundings, so that the stranger daily grew fonder of his environment till one evening, when he chanced to stroll by himself without the city walls and to enter an attractive garden that was filled with curious erections of stone and marble set amid masses of flowers and shaded by lofty trees. It seemed a peaceful spot, but the Stranger was so puzzled by the solitude of the garden that on his return to the city he asked the sultan whose property was the beautiful shady enclosure with the carved monuments and the groves of cypresses, and for what purpose was it used. The monarch looked astonished at the question, but told his guest it must have been a cemetery, a burial-ground, the garden and final home of the Dead. Again the Stranger was perplexed: "And what are the Dead?" Then the sultan tried to describe death and the common lot of all the sons and daughters of Adam to his listener, who grew more and more amazed as he endeavoured

to grasp the prince's unfamiliar explanations. "But will you yourself die also?" he finally asked the sultan. "Most assuredly," answered the latter; "all of us, from the highest to the least, king and beggar, man, woman and child, we must perforce all obey the summons of Death when it comes." Without speaking another word, the Stranger quitted the palace in profound silence and with head bent in cogitation over this astounding law of nature he had just heard for the first time. It took him many days of further inquiry and self-communing before he could realise this sudden compulsory cessation of active life which inevitably awaited himself, sooner or later, whether as the result of disease, of accident, of violence or of decay. Long did he reflect, and finally he came to the conclusion that, seeing how soon and how suddenly Death might call him, Life itself so far as its pleasures and its interests and its intrigues were concerned was but a step on the road to Death, which was the final goal with its vista of eternal joy or pain or oblivion. Naturally, the pious writer of this ingenious allegory had sought therefrom to point a lesson of the vanity of all worldly pleasures and success, and of the consequent need of preparation for the after-life, which alone matters; but I had always loved the simple conceit for its own sake without troubling myself much about the inevitable moral. And as I continued to gaze upward at the scintillating orb slowly rising over the topmost

branches, I could not refrain from a comparison between my own conditions in Meleager and those of the mysterious stranger in the Oriental city of his adoption. It seemed a notable coincidence, and I vaguely wondered whether the author had really possessed a true inkling of the possibility of such an exchange of planets as had been suggested in the tale.

D'Aragno's harsh whisper recalled me from my reverie, and from the contemplation of my former sphere to that of tangible objects in my present abode. He bade me follow him across the open starlit glade, all gleaming with heavy dewdrops, and so led the way up-hill to a point whence there was a wide open view bounded by the sea. Far away below us against the misty horizon I could discern two specks of pale yellow light, and I scarcely needed my companion's information to make me realise that these were the twin lanterns of the lighthouses guarding the entrance of the harbour of Tamarida. We were standing also on a fairly wide pathway, apparently a bullock track, and I saw that d'Aragno had led me to one of the chief inland routes of traffic, which I had merely to follow down-hill in order to descend directly into Tamarida. He bade me farewell with some slight show of approval, even stooping so far as to imprint a perfunctory kiss on my hand, the while he pointed out the guiding beacons beneath me. He now bade me farewell and a safe arrival before turning from

me with rapid steps. I watched his dwindling white-robed figure cross the exposed glade and then disappear, a tiny luminous speck, into the enclosing forest, and that was my last glimpse of d'Aragno.

Left to myself I strolled leisurely along the stony but clearly perceptible track, which from this elevation began to wind down the mountain slope towards the coast. I had not walked much above a mile when a sound, at first faint but ever growing in intensity, smote upon my alert ears. I stood still to listen, and soon recognised voices calling in unison, together with the barking and yapping of dogs. It was evidently the search-party that was on its way to rescue me in the forest. Calmly I proceeded, and at a turn in the pathway I could just detect the advancing throng of men, both mounted and a-foot. So soon as these had realised the identity of the figure approaching in the subdued starlight, the whole band halted an instant as if struck stupid, and then from their midst rushed forth Hiridia with a shrill cry of delight and threw himself on the rough ground at my feet, which he covered with kisses. The other members of the party now hurried towards me to show their joy and relief in a manner fully as rapturous if more restrained. I received their felicitations and answered their questions in an indifferent tone, making light of my late misadventure and only expressing concern for the loss of my favourite horse, which however they assured

me had been caught riderless in the woods. Apparently the notion of the wild beasts roaming in the thickets had chiefly aroused their anxiety for me, but this last suggestion I repudiated with quiet scorn. "What has the Child of the Sun," I asked, "to fear from his Father's humblest subjects, the beasts of the forest? Would they have dared to approach his sacred person save to crouch at his feet and lick them in token of his divinity?" At this rebuke all my attendants stood crestfallen and ashamed. Nevertheless, they ventured to express concern for my presumed state of hunger—the Meleagrian is invariably a good and frequent trencherman—but I merely remarked that in no wise was I suffering from want of food: a state of things by the way which was by no means so remarkable as it appeared to my devoted retainers, in view of the hearty meal I had swallowed at d'Aragno's house, that I naturally forbore to mention. Altogether the genuine pleasure and the awestruck feelings wherewith I had been received by my followers afforded me no little satisfaction, as, mounted on a pony with Hiridia proudly holding my bridle, I was escorted by this adoring throng down the steep circling path that led towards the capital. The night was well advanced when finally we arrived at our destination, where I found the whole household in a condition of intense alarm, which speedily was converted into a frantic demonstration of joy on the news of my safe return and

the subsequent sight of myself in their midst. I thought it prudent to attend the public supper in the great hall despite the lateness of the hour, although after my recent refreshment at d'Aragno's I had little appetite left.

The ensuing morning I was visited by the Archpriest, to whose ears had been brought tidings of my mishap of the previous day. He came ostensibly to inquire for my health, but his face betrayed not a little anxiety. I was able to soothe him however, telling him the story of my accident had been grossly exaggerated by the palace servants, and that I was none the worse for a few hours' solitary wandering on foot in the woods, and that I had already chanced upon the right path before ever I had met with the party of searchers. By thus truthfully reciting the half (in this case so much more valuable than the whole !) of my late movements, I was easily enabled to set his fears or suspicions at rest, and after some further conversation on other topics he left my apartment wholly satisfied with his interview.

XV

I AM writing these last few lines by the light of my flickering lamp, as I sit in my favourite gallery that overlooks the city and the harbour of Tamarida. There is a multitude of things I still dearly long to add to what I have already written, but the swift flight of time and this closely covered scroll forbid any such intention on my part. There are, however, two matters, one of public and the other of personal concern, that I should like to hint at before I finally consign my manuscript to its appointed bourne within the next few hours.

First of all, in my bald, inadequate account of the people and polity of Meleager, I fear I have not dwelt sufficiently on the unswerving loyalty of the hierarchy to their own order and to their fixed devotion to what they consider the perfect commonweal; to the general happiness and content of the whole population, and to the universal sense of peace and plenty that prevails here. But remember, I neither praise nor blame, neither approve nor condemn the system that produces ends so desirable in themselves, which form the recognised aim of every conscientious statesman. I have merely described things in Meleager as I have found them. I have made no comment thereon, but only

suggest to the thinkers and politicians of the Earth to discover better and more honourable methods of attaining equal results.

The other question that vexes my mind is purely personal, or rather egoistic. I wonder greatly whether my present plight in Meleager will excite feelings of pity, of contempt or of envy in the minds of my readers. As to the first, I am cut off from all domestic ties and affections; I am unspeakably lonely with the oppressive sense of solitude in a crowd; in certain lights I may even be regarded as a prisoner on parole; I am perpetually spied upon, and every action on my part, however innocent or well-intentioned, is apt to be regarded with uneasy suspicion by those who are my real masters. Again I am in the position of a conscious participant in that gigantic scheme of fraud, The Secret, by means of which all the state craft of Meleager is worked. I am also, to fit me for the continuance of my royal office, subjected at fairly short intervals to a series of personal indignities that may endow me with the requisite strength and youth at the moment when my body is beginning to exhibit signs of languor and dissolution. In compensation for these trials and disadvantages, I enjoy perfect health; I dwell in a magnificent palace surrounded by adoring courtiers and servants; I even experience the inestimable delight of performing public duties which are gratefully and rapturously accepted by my deluded subjects; I taste the sweets of

divine honours, and at the same time can gratify some of the natural tastes of a mortal man. It amuses me to leave to others I shall never meet the solution of a question I cannot answer for myself!

As I lift my eyes from my parchment, I note a thin streak of oriflamme above the eastern horizon, and I know that very soon the new-born day will be heralded by clarion and cannon from the battlements of the great temple overhead. I have but time and space left me to add the word Farewell and the name I bore on Earth. . . .

PART TWO

"I love to lose myself in a mystery: to pursue my reason to an O Altitudo!"

RELIGIO MEDICI (sect. ix.).

I

How passing wonderful it is that I should be enabled to send another message to the Earth, and still more wonderful, wonderful out of all whooping, that I should be writing it not as sovereign of an unsuspected planet but as a humble member of the human hive on Earth itself, here in this mean Welsh seaside inn! As to my former missive which I dispatched to my present abode through d'Aragno's kind offices some two years ago, I have, of course, no notion as to its final fate. That it really did reach the sphere of its destination I am convinced; but whether it is still lying unheeded on some rolling steppe or sterile mountain range; or whether it has been ascertained, deciphered, discussed, nay even printed, I am wholly in the dark.[1] Not that I seek to vex my mind in this matter. Nevertheless, it amuses me to assume that my former letter from Meleager has been duly found, debated and published, even though such assumption likewise includes the theory that its veracity is discredited by all who have cared to study its contents. Are we not assured in The Book that one arising specially from the dead and scorched with the flames of hell will

[1] This was obviously written before the interview described in a later chapter.—C. W.

not arouse belief in the living man? And if the mission of Dives to his careless brethren be a predestined failure, what chance of credence can possibly await such a message in manuscript from Meleager? Leaving these barren speculations, I intend to resume the tale of my adventures at the point where I halted—namely, on the eve of my entrusting my scroll to the custody of the Meleagrian councillor.

It is not so easy to judge of the exact passage of time in Meleager, but I fancy about two years must have flowed past without any incident worthy of record since I parted with my cherished manuscript. The diurnal revolution of duty, sleep, exercise and meditation marched so smoothly onward that it came to my unprepared mind as a crashing shock to learn that my cycle of calm existence was liable to fierce disturbance. My sharp awakening was on this wise. For some days I had received no visit from my dear old friend, the Arch-priest (for by this time, in spite of certain barriers of circumstance and polity, he had grown very dear to me), and this omission caused me to feel some degree of anxiety concerning his absence. More curious than alarmed I therefore asked one of the hierarchy, Vaïlo, who was in attendance, the cause of this suspension of the usual visits. The councillor, discreetly casting his eyes to the ground, replied that the Arch-priest was expecting shortly to be absorbed into the family

of the Sun-god. Albeit enigmatically thus expressed, I could not fail to realise the gravity of the news; in plain parlance, my friend and adviser was on the point of dissolution. A horrible chill invaded my heart, and I felt sick with a sense of genuine sorrow and of deep misgiving. I knew him to be old, and I ought therefore to have anticipated the propinquity of his death, but with blind egoism I had overlooked such eventualities. My first impulse was to ply Vaïlo with questions as to his condition and chance of recovery, but the guarded replies afforded me no ray of hope. I even begged to be conducted to the old man's bedside to take a last farewell, but this request Vaïlo (I think and trust with a touch of pity in his harsh voice) assured me was illegal. I then lapsed into sullen silence, whereupon the councillor took the opportunity to depart, leaving me a prey to unspeakable misery and agitation.

All that night I tossed and turned on my luxurious bed, and such short spells of sleep as I snatched only reflected the dour images that were passing through my brain. Mechanically I undertook my usual duties in the morning, and later in the day I was sitting beside a solitary and untasted meal in my balcony, moodily staring with fixed unseeing eyes at the beautiful prospect sweltering in the noontide sunshine, when Hiridia suddenly entered to announce that a litter was being borne up the palace steps. A moment later appeared a

messenger with the request for an audience of the Arch-priest, who was too feeble to approach on foot. With my black despair of a moment past converted into temporary relief, I signed my assent, and all expectation I watched the palanquin being carried through the ante-chamber and finally set down on the pavement of the balcony. With my own hand I assisted its venerable occupant to alight and to install himself with some degree of comfort in a large chair. It was distressing to mark the changes that the past few days had wrought in my beloved friend, whom I had always regarded as a sublime picture of hale and hearty age, sound alike in body and intellect. Now the skin drawn taut over the face appeared like yellow parchment; the hands were dry and osseous; the gait was languid and hesitating; verily, the seal of impending death was firmly set alike on limb and lineament. So soon as we were left alone, the Arch-priest, gazing at me steadfastly with an expression in which were blended at once pity, affection and grave concern, held out his poor trembling arms towards me, whereupon I sank to the floor so as to lay my head on the thick white folds of the robe that covered his emaciated form. Long time he continued to stroke my hair or gently trace my features with his dry, feverish hands, much as a blind man might seek to feel or sense some precious object, the while I wept unrestrained tears, whose bitter flow seemed to relieve my heart of some of its accumulated anguish. Thus

we remained, age comforting and supporting youth, and both finding mutual consolation in this belated concession and yielding to an open affection from which we had so long been debarred. At length a warning voice in gentle, feeble tones bade me dry my eyes and rise to my feet.

" My son," began the old man, " my son, for in my heart I have long adopted you as such, your image and your fate have been troubling me in dreams upon my bed. Be strong. Be prepared for evil tidings. My life is ebbing fast, as you may see, but there are matters I must announce to you before my small stock of vitality is exhausted. Seat yourself in that chair facing me, and give me your hand to clasp, whilst I tell you what I specially desire to impart. . . .

" I am a very old man, and though I have retained my powers of mind and body in a degree that is unusual in Meleager, whose denizens fade as they mature earlier than do those of the Earth, the inevitable call has sounded at last, and in my case more swiftly and suddenly than I could have wished. For many months past I have been deeply distressed on your behalf, my son. I have been rent and vexed by the rival claims of duty towards my office and of my pity and affection towards yourself. Or rather, I have been speculating with ceaseless anxiety as to where my real duty lay. As a councillor of the hierarchy of Meleager and a keeper of The Secret I am impelled to abandon you to

your fate, be what it may; yet as one who is about to say farewell to all things in this existence, I feel I cannot, I must not depart thus without lifting from you the cloud of subtlety and intrigue wherewith your young life is overshadowed. I have endured hideous visions upon my bed; I have heard your voice of reproach and pictured your final struggle; I have communed with my own soul in perfect frankness; and as the result of this spiritual conflict, involving so many diverse arguments, I am here to-day to warn you."

Again the old man extended his wasted arms towards me and embraced me with a renewed burst of tenderness. Then he motioned to me to resume my seat.

"I must hasten to divulge what is lying like a load upon my heart, for my span of life can now but be reckoned by hours, not days. In the first place you have been grievously, wilfully deceived by our envoy on Earth and also by myself (though herein I have been merely following the normal trend of our polity) in one most important matter. For you have been permitted, even encouraged, to believe that your reign here in Meleager can be indefinitely prolonged, provided you do not set yourself to withstand or embarrass the ruling hierarchy of this planet. Only theoretically is this true. It is a fact, I admit, that our kings can be rejuvenated over and over again, and by this means be enabled to survive generation after generation of Melea-

grians—but this never happens in reality. Not a few monarchs have these aged eyes of mine witnessed in Meleager, and I have heard tell of others, but not one of these has attained to so much as two lustres of regnant power in the star to which they had been translated under circumstances similar to your own. It is true our kings have often brought premature and well-deserved disaster on their own heads, but of such I am not now thinking. I am speaking of our hierarchy who are by no means immaculate, and whose intrigues and jealousy will not permit any monarch to escape his predetermined end, no matter how conspicuous his merits. Not that all our members are tainted with this disease of treachery, that is far from being the case; but in every executive body so strong is the spirit of self-interest that no scruples will stand in the way of preserving power, from whatsoever cause it is once threatened. Men are mostly evil, as your great Italian thinker, Nicholas Machiavelli, was bold enough to proclaim, and their guides or politicians are crafty animals who suck advantage from every weakness of humanity. Such being the inevitable state of things politic, our poor monarchs are placed in a hopeless dilemma, whereby they are doomed to failure, and for the following reasons. If they avoid the snare of politics, they grow vicious or oppressive of the populace, so that they lose the general esteem, and the watching hierarchy is swift to annex this alienated favour and to transfer it to

its own body by ridding Meleager of an obnoxious semi-divine King. Again, it has happened on not a few occasions that the King has set to combine with the subservient populace against the real ruling caste. I myself have seen these palace courts and halls slippery with the blood of slaves and soldiers who have sought at the royal bidding to overthrow the executive council, and have themselves been overwhelmed and massacred in the attempt. Or else, commonest and most dreaded event of all that we prepare to circumvent, our monarch will seek to found a dynasty. This is a danger we are compelled to nip in the bud by eliminating the erring sovereign rather than by destroying the victim or tool of his designs. But you yourself belong to none of these categories of undesirable rulers—the ambitious, the despotic, the brutal, the licentious, the knavish; and it is for this very distinction that I now have come hither to inform you of certain things.

"You alone of all the earth-rapt monarchs of Meleager that ever I have known or heard of have pursued an even tenor of deportment, holding yourself strictly aloof from the besetting snares of popular adulation and of selfish indolence. You have never strained to encroach on the prerogative of the hierarchy, yet you have openly and boldly clung to such shreds of power as our constitution legally permits you to exercise. You have never stooped to flatter the priestly caste; although you

have given proof again and again that you clearly understand and appreciate the intertwining nature of the bonds that unite the offices of King and council. You have shown yourself affable and gracious to our nobility; kindly and sympathetic to the people without any ulterior object in your behaviour. You have forborne to break our laws with regard to dalliance with women, for in your case no spy has as yet reported any such dereliction on your part. You have worked well, within the limits assigned to you, to assist the well-being of the community; and it is also evident that you are a cordial upholder of our fundamental theory that human happiness rather than human progress offers the truest mark for statesmanship, and that those who enjoy the sweets of office and power must alone taste of the bitter punishment entailed by their own failure or disloyalty. In my eyes, therefore, you are the ideal King; and yet, and yet, you will not survive to behold the complement of the half score of years of sovereignty, which has only once been attained hitherto in the whole course of Meleagrian annals. Your very virtues of self-restraint and implicit honour have only contrived to arouse in its direst shape that spectre of suspicion which is the guiding genius of our state craft. In other words, even a good King of Meleager is likewise foredoomed, whatever struggles and sacrifices he may make to gain and hold the approval of his virtual masters.

" To divert my warning now from the general

to the particular, I must tell you that on my departure hence to the Hereafter, every signal points clearly to the approaching cessation of your reign. Unless I am gravely mistaken, the councillor who is marked out to succeed me as Arch-priest leads our most truculent faction, and under his auspices no long period will elapse before the order will go forth for a change of monarch. Doubtless not a few voices will be raised in your behalf, for you have grown dear to many of us; but I feel convinced such pleading will not prevail. By this time you must, with your acquisitive mind, have guessed at the fate which awaits yourself, the fate that has engulfed so many of your predecessors, the Fountain of Rejuvenation. The sustaining ropes will be cut during your plunge therein, so that the fierce undercurrent may draw you into the bowels of the underworld. Thus will you cease to reign, as we phrase it with euphemistic delicacy. Should you perchance be cunning enough to elude this mode of execution, rest assured there are other means in plenty equally awful and drastic, once the fiat of your removal has been definitely pronounced. My son, you must prepare to meet your fate, for though I still hope some unexpected turn of Fortune's wheel may yet operate for your preservation, in my opinion your doom is already imminent. But one ray of comfort, or rather one spell of delay, I am able to promise you. By our immutable laws the newly elected Arch-priest, who guards the rites and mysteries of

that dreadful fountain, is compelled to retain in office the two attendant councillors who assist in carrying out the process of the lustration. Thus on the first occasion of this ceremony under my successor you will be absolutely safe, for I have obtained the most solemn assurances to this effect from the two colleagues who have lately served me in this capacity. But this arrangement will only affect the next ceremony, for thenceforth the new Arch-priest is empowered to select assistants of his own, and naturally he will choose his own creatures for the required purpose. Still, such a respite will afford you some breathing-space for preparation and self-communing, as it will prolong your existence for the space of a further half-year. Perhaps fresh developments may arise within that span of time—who knows?

"One thing I implore of you, and I know I do not ask in vain. Do not stir up strife in our planet, as other kings have done before you. Your chance of success is almost hopeless, as no doubt you already realise, knowing the intensity of the suspicion wherewith every movement on your part is regarded and provided for. Because you are destined to die, die alone, and forbear to drag a number of innocent persons along with you to your doom. You have performed your manifest duty for the past seven years with a steadfast beneficence that is worthy of your alleged father, the Sun; and remember, it is the fulfilment of duty alone that counts in the future

life of the Hereafter, whose prospective blessings will eventually be yours."

I cannot describe the tender and earnest manner of the dying man's discourse, terrible though its disclosures were to myself. Even the final piece of advice, platitude of every creed and clime though it was, seemed to come as a help and a spur to me at this critical juncture. After all, what is a platitude but the untimely expression of some great basic truth? And here, from the venerable hierophant, who from a strict sense of duty had left his sick-bed to come hither and instruct me, the words seemed to possess a peculiar meaning and value; his simple appeal to my own sense of rectitude had all the force of a profound thought extracted from a world of thinking. I could only press the hot, dry, bony hand, as I shrouded my head in the folds of my royal mantle in a vain endeavour to subdue a fresh bout of weeping.

"And now," continued my companion, making an effort to rise, "I must depart with my blessing upon you. Long may you be spared to rule in Meleager; and if not so, then we shall meet in due sequence within that narthex of silence and shadows which forms the vestibule to the temple of the Hereafter."

Once more he embraced me long and lovingly, after which he bade me strike the bell reposing on the table. At his request too I passed to the farthest end of the balcony, so as to keep my face

averted from the little group of attendants who now assisted the dying man to his litter. I could hear the shuffling of feet and whispering of voices involved in the task of transporting my old friend, whilst with swimming eyes I gazed blankly at the white cheerful city, the cool greenery of the palace gardens and the flashing liquid mirror of the haven of Tamarida. Nor did I budge from my stiff, comfortless pose till at length I felt a light touch on the shoulder, the respectful touch of a privileged dependent. On turning my eyes, still red and swollen with my lately shed tears, they met the honest, inquiring face of Hiridia, who was regarding me reproachfully, as though rebuking me in silence for such an unseemly lack of control. I made the necessary attempt in the form of a wan smile and a request for a cup of wine; for a true public ruler must exhibit no private sorrow. Was it not the magnificent Giovanni dei Medici, Pope Leo the Tenth, who was reprimanded by his punctilious chamberlain for falling to tears openly on the news of the death of his favourite brother, "seeing that the Roman pontiff was a demi-god and not a man, and must therefore display a serene and smiling countenance on all occasions to the people"? It was in this spirit then that I accepted Hiridia's tacit reproof; sometimes the will of man imposes itself on the weakness of the gods.

II

THREE days later I was informed of the passing of Anzoni, Arch-priest of Meleager, and of the election of Marzona as his successor. For the former part of this intelligence I was, of course, fully prepared, but the latter intimation aroused my worst apprehensions and depressed my spirits to their lowest depth. For I understood only too well the hard, intractable, suspicious nature of the councillor who had just been chosen—by what means or on what system I knew not—to fill the vacant office of my dear old friend. All I could do was to conceal with equal adroitness both my sorrow for the first calamity and my anxiety over the second, and to pursue my normal course of life with all the composure at my disposal. Nevertheless, my first formal interview with the new potentate only served to strengthen every foreboding on my part. Marzona always treated me, I admit, with a courteous demeanour whether in public or private; but I was only too conscious on every occasion of our meeting that I was in the presence of a crafty, unrelenting foe, whom it would be useless to attempt to placate. As for Marzona's prior career, I had gathered some time ago that he was by birth a plebeian "intellectual," who had risen by his talents (in the

manner already described by me in my former letter) to the order of the nobility, and from the ranks of the nobles had contrived to pass through the school of the neophytes and the college of the probationers, and thence into the coveted oligarchy beyond. For private reasons he had always aimed at the office of Arch-priest, sedulously declining, with this particular objective in view, to undertake the voyage to the Earth, with the result that now at last he had attained to that eminence on which for years he had concentrated his hopes, his desires and all his immense capacity of intrigue. In appearance Marzona was not unprepossessing, and his face, which showed of a somewhat lighter tint than is usual in Meleager, would have been accounted handsome, were it not for the dull hazel eyes, which, however, constantly emitted from their recesses a ruddy gleam, reminding me of the hidden tongue of flame that lurks in the so-called black opals of Queensland. To a nature so sensitive as mine, the very approach of this personage caused an involuntary tremor of repulsion, and in my heart I always quailed when those expressionless, opalescent orbs were directed at me.

In estimating our misfortunes and brooding over them, we are unwittingly given to exaggerate, so forcibly works within us the irrepressible spirit of egoism. We oftentimes hold ourselves to be the absolute sport of some malign fury, whereas, did we but know it, we have in reality but commenced

to drink of that bitter cup which we imagine we have almost drained to the dregs. So it was in my own case of despondency. I could not figure to myself a worse disaster than what had just befallen me in the double blow caused by my old protector's death and the election of his odious supplanter; and accordingly I set to lament my grievances as though they were incapable of further extension. My mental blindness on this point was however swiftly and suddenly illumined by means of a recurring stroke of evil that was dealt me within three weeks of the election of the new Arch-priest. On awaking one morning I missed Hiridia's customary entrance into my chamber, an omission of duty that had never occurred previously except with my consent and knowledge. The day passed slowly without any sign of my chamberlain, so that I grew angered, puzzled and finally alarmed. Still, some inner shrinking urged me to restrain my natural annoyance and curiosity as to this mysterious lapse, and it was not till nightfall that I summoned Zulàr, my senior equerry, and questioned him with such nonchalance as I could assume concerning the cause of Hiridia's abstention. Zulàr, who seemed terribly nervous, at first sought to evade my inquiries; but on my growing stern and insistent, he admitted to me what I realised at once to be the truth, or at least a portion of the truth; Hiridia had entered the school of neophytes the preceding night, having lately developed a vocation

for the hierarchy, for which his age now rendered him eligible. So far, this was strictly accurate, for I knew that the graceful stripling of some seven years ago had quite recently attained the prescribed age, being indeed a youth no longer; also I was convinced he really was interned within the walls of the seminary. On the other hand, it was inconceivable that Hiridia should have deserted his master in so abrupt and so insolent a fashion, even supposing he had honestly wished to graduate for the hierarchy, of which intention on his part I had never observed the least indication. His loyalty and devotion to myself and my interests were beyond question, and I had the anguish to realise that my poor favourite had been treacherously kidnapped and was now a veritable prisoner within the walls of that hierarchical castle.

Fortunately indignation rather than grief was the predominating emotion of the moment, so that I at once dispatched the affrighted Zulàr to bear a message from me to the Arch-priest, bidding him attend with all speed at the palace. For hours I waited in wakeful fury the arrival of Marzona, who on some pretext contrived to delay his coming until the following morning was well advanced. Perhaps this slighting of my command was not wholly without benefit to myself, for by the time of his belated appearance my mood had grown calmer and I was disposed to regard the situation with some degree of diplomatic restraint. Without, therefore, directly

assuming his influence in the matter, I bade Marzona explain to me this sudden resolve on Hiridia's part, whereby I had been unexpectedly deprived of an official whose services I valued so highly. I also laid stress on the erratic and disrespectful manner of his withdrawal from my Court. Coldly and steadily those dull, jade-coloured eyes scanned my face, as I expatiated on my wrongs, so that I could easily gather there was no help forthcoming from this quarter whence doubtless had emanated this cunning stroke of malevolence. When I had made an end, the Arch-priest began in suave tones of pseudo-sympathy to express his regret for my loss, whose extent he did not seek to minimise. At the same time, so he explained to me, the laws of Meleager with regard to postulants for the hierarchy were fundamental in their scope, and consequently utterly beyond the control or interference of the Arch-priest. Hiridia had exceeded his thirtieth year, and was therefore free to choose and inaugurate such a career at any moment; at the same time he agreed with me in thinking that Hiridia's conduct in so quitting my service showed a lamentable lack of gratitude and consideration to a most indulgent patron. And he again offered me his condolences for my loss and resulting inconvenience.

No Medicean Secretary of State could have exhibited greater reserve and finesse in argument and deportment than did the new Arch-priest of Meleager in this interview with myself. Had it not

all been so tragical and alarming, I could almost have been won to admiration of the easy duplicity of Marzona, who parried my questions and pretended to soothe my complaints of ill-treatment, the while wholly indifferent to the patent fact that I was clearly reading his black hostile heart. The moral prototype of this man must have flourished centuries ago at the venal courts of Rome and Ferrara; had the state craft of the petty Italian despots of the Renaissance been transplanted into the fertile soil of Meleagrian hearts, here in the twentieth century of our Herthian Christian era? Disgusted and wearied at last from this verbal fencing with an invulnerable antagonist, I nodded my head in token that the interview was at an end and the incident closed, my sole ray of consolation being that Marzona did not perhaps truly appraise the full extent of the injury he had dealt me by his recent seizure of Hiridia's person. Possibly he may have relied on my being goaded thereby into indiscreet abuse, and if such were his main object, in this design he had at least been foiled. Verily, this reflection was a sorry crumb of compensation for the blighting loss I had sustained; still, it offered some moral support in itself to think that I had successfully curbed my natural fury. At the same time I did not wholly veil my attitude of intense displeasure, for I argued it might possibly excite fresh suspicion in another guise were I to bear my late discomfiture too lightly in outward

appearance. With my heart therefore secretly wrung and tortured and with my brain afire from impotent indignation, I sought to swallow my late indignities with as good a grace as I could muster.

If man is incapable of estimating the full degree of a visitation of evil, so also is he equally at fault in appreciating his present advantages, until he be suddenly deprived of them. So it fell in this matter of Hiridia's removal, whose unhappy consequences to myself only emerged gradually after the event. Until a few weeks ago I could never have believed that Hiridia's companionship had been of such vital help to me or had so sweetened my royal existence. I had been accustomed to regard my erstwhile tutor rather as a favoured page whom it amused me to confide in, to mystify, to scold, or to twit as might suit my passing whim. That I should have deeply regretted his departure I was quite ready to admit; but I never anticipated the serious nature of my loss till that loss was effected. A veritable portion of myself seemed to have been lopped away by this devilish scheme; whilst the haunting thought that the poor boy—for I made scant allowance for his thirty years now fulfilled—was almost certainly sobbing out his faithful and affectionate heart in a hateful prison, only served to fan the flame of my torment. Yet I was helpless and powerless, and could only await the approach of the solstice, when the expected bath in the Fountain of Rejuvenation might possibly brace my brain for some successful plan of action.

III

Happily this ceremony was not many weeks distant, and its approach afforded me some objective, however uncertain and inadequate, for fixing my hopes in the future. The lassitude too that usually preceded this half-yearly reinvigorating process had appeared rather earlier than its wont, so that the physical weariness and languor were already rendering my brain less active and thereby indirectly supplying me with some measure of relief from my tense anxiety. I continued to perform my daily duties in the judgment halls of the city, but otherwise I ceased to leave the palace during this time of ineffable loneliness and humiliation. To fill Hiridia's vacant place of chamberlain I nominated Zulàr, and likewise selected another equerry. With my daily routine thus proceeding outwardly much as usual, I relied on my being left in peace throughout the intervening weeks before the coming of the solstice. But herein I was grievously mistaken in supposing that the machinations of my enemies had been even temporarily suspended, as the following incident can testify.

I was in the habit, especially during the hot weather, of sitting in the palace gardens to meditate. Now, in my case, this daily custom of meditation

supplied the place of reading, and with constant practice it was interesting to find how excellent a substitute for books it became in course of time. For I had gradually grown to appreciate the luxury of solitary thought to such an extent that I should have lamented the cessation of these opportunities as many an earth-born mortal would regard his deprivation of all printed matter. "He is never alone who is accompanied by noble thoughts," and inasmuch as I felt myself in the cue for tragedy, poetry, comedy or pure fantasy, so I had grown an adept in attaching my prevailing humour to the trend of my musings. Thus I passed long hours of solitary communing in a world of my own peopled with my intimate aspirations, ideals, conceits and fancies. My favourite spot for the practice of these cerebral gymnastics, if I may so describe them, was a certain shady corner of the palace gardens which terminated in a semicircular marble bench backed by a close-clipped hedge of bay and daphne. The path leading hither was likewise lined with thick walls of aromatic verdure, so that the air was often odorous with the clinging scent of aleagnis and allspice. Overhead the branches of taller trees had been artfully pleached, whilst the young leaves of the topmost boughs in opposition to the fierce beams of the invading sunlight caused a soft golden haze to brood in the sylvan vaulting of this green alley. As I lay on my marble couch I used to note the penetrating shafts of sunshine discover the knots of

golden wire that bound together these over-arching limbs, exposing the artificial origin of the bower and reminding me of Leonardo da Vinci's *Arbour of Love* with its gilded true-lovers' knots that still flourishes in one of the vaulted chambers of the Sforzas' gloomy citadel in Milan. True, I used to miss in my leafy Meleagrian lair the mocking fauns and nymphs of Boboli and Borghese, who seemed set on their stone pedestals to watch with sly glances as to whether Christian mortals would behave with more decorum than themselves in those delicious and provocative groves, where in primitive days they were

> "Wont to clasp their loves at noon-tide,
> Close as lovers clasp at night,"

with none to call aloud Halt! or Fie! To make amends for the absence of these simulacra of the jolly pagan life of Herthus, there was a fountain hidden somewhere behind the bosky screens, which allowed its water to flow in a series of cadences and pauses and arpeggios, so that it sung a lullaby that was by no means monotonous to the surrounding thickets and to any stray inhabitant thereof.

Here I used to expend many an hour in perfect solitude, seeking repose and release from the canker of anxiety, trying more or less effectually to emulate the advice of the poet and to annihilate my entity to a green thought in a green shade.

It was on a hot afternoon that after the midday

meal I sought as usual my cherished retreat, wherein I seated myself according to my custom, appreciating at once the melody of the unseen fountain, the droning of the bees in the scented bloom without and the amber radiance caught in the interwoven branches overhead. Lying thus, I sought to hit on some apposite theme whereon to concentrate my powers of meditation. But the jaded brain and the perturbed mind to-day refused to permit me any relief from the engrossing melancholy of my present situation. Thus I sate limp and despairing on my bench, utterly oblivious of the passage of time and only dimly conscious of the amenities of art and nature wherewith I was surrounded. From this drowsy mood of reflection I was suddenly recalled by a rustling sound close beside me. With ears alert I heard the sound increase, and a moment later descried the thick wall of box and laurel tremble and then divide so as to allow the figure of a young female to emerge from its depths. In sheer amazement I continued to stare, grasping every detail of the intruder's face and dress, as she gracefully extricated her form out of the detaining undergrowth. She was taller and slighter in build than the average type of her sex in Meleager; her skin was considerably fairer and of an elegant pallor; her hair had glints of gold and chestnut to relieve its blackness; her eyes were like beryls. Clad in her green robe and coif she certainly appeared a natural incarnation, a veritable hamadryad, amidst

these secluded groves which had just produced her. Instinctively I realised she was no true native of Meleager; her figure, her eyes, her skin, her gestures were not those of my subjects; on the contrary, there was a subtle but pervading suggestion that this interloper was of the Earth. Was she then the daughter, or possibly the descendant, of some predecessor of mine in this perilous throne who had risked his crown in an amorous adventure? Who was she? Whence was she? Why was she here? Such questions naturally chased one another across my perplexed brain, but the third of them at least the new-comer was evidently only too anxious to explain. I myself was the goal and aim of her present vagary, for still crouching low she writhed towards my feet, which she proceeded to clasp, whilst with tears in her beautiful eyes and breakings of her rich tender voice she began to implore my protection.

Beset thus unawares, I could do no less than listen to the rambling tale of woe and injustice her parted rosy lips delivered; how she had managed to escape from the hateful tutelage of the priestesses of the Sun; how she knew she could rely on my assistance; and how many sanctuaries of easy concealment existed in the purlieus of the palace. All the while this torrent of entreaty, flattery and self-commiseration was being poured forth in an unbroken stream, my suppliant contrived to edge nearer and nearer to myself, half-rising from her knees and lifting her shapely white arms to the level

of my shoulders. There was an influence, an aroma about her that vaguely suggested the women of my own planet. I realised the existence of some indefinable link between my own nature and hers, something of the Earth earthy, and therefore inestimably precious here in Meleager. A warm current of human sympathy and magnetic attraction seemed to be circulating around me. One moment, one second more, and I felt we should be locked together in one another's arms, we two hapless dwellers on Meleager belonging of right to another world and meeting in an alien planet. One second more, and we two waifs of different sexes would have been caught in an embrace of commingled sorrow and devotion, caring naught for the dangers ahead and happy only in our new-found union of congenial souls. The bewitching face, with eyes that sparkled through the film of tears and with radiant youth lurking in their wells of light, was almost touching my own, when there flashed before me a vision rather than a thought of my impending danger. I glimpsed a sensation of orbs vigilant and sinister, multitudinous as the eyes in the peacock's tail, usurping the places of the leaves around me; the playing water's chant turned into a sudden note of terrified warning and entreaty; the golden haze above grew lurid. With supreme energy I knit my remaining strength together, as I battled with the temptation to surrender. My bodily powers rose in obedience to my guiding brain, and extricating

myself none too gently from the already twining arms of the maiden, I caught her with my right palm a resounding box on the ear which echoed through that sylvan silence. At the same moment I shouted aloud, and leaped to my feet. It was as if scales had fallen from my mental eyes, for I could sense, even if I could not actually see the enclosing hedges filled with spies, some of whom were hurrying stealthily hence, whilst others were preparing to enter the alley in as natural a manner as they could assume. These latter came forward sheepishly and stood before me, as I pointed to the grovelling form of the girl who was now weeping violently at my feet. Whose duty was it, I asked, to prevent strange women from invading these gardens and disturbing the noontide repose of the Child of the Sun? As to my late reception of the charmer, even assuming that every motion of mine had been carefully observed by this battalion of eavesdroppers, there could be no question as to the final rebuff her advances had encountered. Her shriek of dismay and the scarlet flush on her pale cheek were at least sufficient witnesses of the fact that I had not fallen into the trap that had been so elaborately prepared for my ensnaring. Without proof positive I had good reason to imagine that many of the persons concealed in the bushes were not spies at all, but admirers and supporters of my own, who had been specially invited hither to test my fallibility. If such were the case, the Arch-priest and his satellites must have received

a distinct shock over this conspicuous miscarriage of their scheme concocted for the express purpose of alienating and disgusting those members of the council who upheld my honour and integrity.

Quivering with an anger that I did not attempt to dissemble, I left the open-mouthed group beside the girl who was still sobbing hysterically on the ground. As for her, why should I waste a tittle of compassion on her misfortune? Are not all creatures and tools of cunning politicians always treated with contumely both by employers and unmaskers when their ignoble missions fail? With indignant mien therefore I strode from the gardens and retired to the palace, where I gave the captain of the royal bodyguard a rating for his alleged lack of vigilance. One result at any rate this plot secured for me, and that was a complete freedom from further molestation during the remainder of the period before the coming festival. A further interview with Marzona however soon after this incident only made me perceive yet more clearly the utter impossibility of my arriving at any compact with an implacable and unscrupulous enemy, who was merely biding his time to strike again and strike harder. It was in vain that I essayed overtures; all my attempts at understanding and conciliation were met with an icy condescension that made my task obviously hopeless; and indeed from this time forward the Arch-priest rarely gave me the opportunity of an interview save in the presence of other colleagues.

IV

At length the expected date of my official rejuvenating process arrived, to which I submitted with unusual docility. Despite the murderous intentions of Marzona, I endured the subsequent plunge into the fountain without trepidation, although I dared not face the baleful eyes of the personage whose malignity was rendered powerless for this occasion by the inevitable laws of Meleager. I fancied I could detect an air of quiet reassurance to myself in the bearing of the two inferior councillors; but in any case I swallowed my apprehensions to the best of my ability and entered that malodorous but invigorating fluid with a firm bearing. I duly obtained my reward, for when I emerged all dripping from the seething pool, I experienced a buoyancy of mind and body beyond that of any previous occasion. Thus refreshed and refortified, I deemed myself capable of taking the initiative, and so cheerful and confident did I feel that I was almost tempted to snap my fingers in that saturnine face as it grimly surveyed my drying and dressing. Before ever I quitted the baptistery, several schemes of policy, and even of escape, began to invade my brain, so that I longed to be alone with my own thoughts; nor did many days elapse

before I had adumbrated a certain scheme of procedure.

This plan was, it is true, somewhat shadowy in its outline, but it was founded on the assumption that any active effort on my part was preferable to mere stagnation, to a passive courting of future disaster. My idea too was of a dual nature, for it aimed both at self-preservation and also at an unveiling of The Secret. For some time past I had been speculating on the uses of Mount Crystal with its temple of the Altar of the Sun, and from many items of information I had acquired in devious or accidental ways, I had come to the certain conclusion that on this rocky peak was to be sought the key of the mystery. A presentiment, that was already become an article of faith to me, told me that by penetrating hither even at a venture, I should be pursuing the sole avenue leading to ultimate escape, to regained liberty, to a safe return to Earth. In my fresh exuberance of mentality I kept arguing to myself that as my translation to Meleager had been successfully accomplished, so also there existed a chance, however difficult, of my returning safe to my original domicile. My immediate object therefore was to enter that distant temple on the shoulder of the mountain, which I could descry from my palace windows; the goal once attained, I must trust further to my sharpened wits. The spirit of adventure flamed hot within me, so that I found some difficulty in concealing

my vigorous excitement under an air of lazy indifference.

My first piece of preparation caused me to smile inwardly, but it at least implied belief in a successful issue of my plan. It consisted in extracting a number of gems from various ornaments which had been bestowed on me for the decoration of my person, had I been so minded. From these I cautiously removed a quantity of sapphires, alexandrites and other precious stones, which I enclosed in a small leather bag attached to a stout gold chain round my neck. Without such a reserve of potential capital I scarcely relished the prospect of my return in the form of a pauper to my native Earth, where that ancient deity Mammon draws a conspicuous following in every cult, and is likewise the leading, if not the sole, guide of the irreligious. Without the possession of such a talisman, I knew I should be liable to exposure to many ills and indignities; and I congratulated myself on my forethought in this measure of precaution, and also on my retentive memory concerning the universal conditions of the Earth at the date of my removal.

Having completed this minor preliminary detail, I proceeded to greater things. Now the sacred mountain stands at a considerable distance from Tamarida, and in no case would it have been possible for me (setting aside the existence of watchers and spies in the palace itself) to make my way thither within the few hours of darkness

on which I was compelled to rely for the execution of my plan. I therefore decided to pay a visit to a nobleman named Lotta, who owned an estate that was bounded by the ravine separating the area of Mount Crystal from the mainland. For the mountain itself is a peninsula, washed on three sides by the sea, whilst the fourth side consists of a long narrow arid gully which is crossed at one spot by a viaduct. The precincts of Mount Crystal are, as I have already said, the property of the hierarchy, and nobody is permitted to enter this reserved domain save the councillors and their servants, who approach by this solitary bridge. In vulgar esteem the thick forests and rocky glens of the forbidden space are haunted by evil spirits, so that I felt sure no Meleagrian of the people would venture to scale its precipitous slopes, even by daylight; whilst no noble would naturally intrude on this sacrosanct spot. From these deductions therefore I concluded that the sole means of ingress, the viaduct, was not likely to be guarded with any great strength or vigilance, seeing how little fear of a trespasser there must be on the part of the custodians of the place. Having reasoned so far, I had also formed the opinion that, the bridge once safely traversed, there would be little to hinder my speedy arrival at the temple itself, beyond which my present calculations did not extend.

Not many days after the solstice therefore I set forth, accompanied only by Zulàr, on my proposed

visit to the country house of my indicated host who received me with every sign of satisfaction and respect. I had paid several visits here in the past, so that my present resolution could not, and indeed did not, excite the smallest suspicion on the part of my enemies, who were in no wise disturbed by my departure from the palace. On the second evening of my visit I was talking to young Bávil, my entertainer's son and heir, a special favourite of mine, and in the course of our conversation I promised the lad a particular spear of my own invention. The boy's eyes eagerly glistened at the mention of this welcome gift, whereupon I summoned Zulàr and bade him hasten to the palace after his supper, fetch the required weapon, and return with it on the following morning. Having thus contrived to rid myself of Zulàr's presence on so simple an errand, I continued to sit with Lotta and his family during the sociable interval that in Meleager extends from supper till bedtime.

Retiring to rest at an early hour I crept into my bed fully clothed, and waited anxiously thus until the last sound of wakefulness in the household had died away. When all was still, I rose cautiously from my couch, crossed the room on tiptoe and slipped through the open casement into the warm greyness of a summer's night without moonshine and without dew. Quietly I pursued the track leading through the gardens and farm of my host towards the lip of the ravine that separated his

estate from the forbidden mountain. From previous hunting expeditions I was sufficiently familiar with this stony narrow pathway, and under this luminous crepuscule I experienced small difficulty in tracing its sinuous progress along the edge of the cliffs. An hour of slow steady walking thus at last brought me to the desired point, a spot where the private path merged into the road running from Tamarida to the viaduct. With eyes now grown fully accustomed to the gloaming I paused to scan the outline of the bridge. As I waited thus in a silence broken only by the ululation of wolves in the distant forests, I could clearly distinguish the soft padding of human feet at no great distance from where I stood. Very carefully I removed my buskins, which I hid in a neighbouring thicket, and thus relieved of my tell-tale foot-gear advanced in the direction of the sound. Peering ahead I soon obtained a better view of the bridge, as well as of the adjoining guard-house, whose façade displayed two squares of pale yellow light, from which I gathered that a guard of men-at-arms was stationed within its walls. Stealthily creeping forward, with body bent and with eyes fixed on the two warning patches of lanthorn light, I speedily espied the source of the faint tramping sound. A sentry, a diminutive but sturdy soldier, was dutifully patrolling the dusty space before the guard-house. Poor little doomed creature, fulfilling his appointed task! Poor little subject of the Child of the Sun, loyal to his creed and

crown, and wholly innocent of all evil intent against myself! Very gently did I convey my sharp serviceable hunting blade from its sheath to my mouth, at the same time divesting myself of my heavy mantle of azure silk, which I placed in both hands ready for a dexterous throw in the manner of the *retiarius* of the Roman amphitheatre. Crouched low like some panther prepared to spring, and armed with dagger and cloak, I waited to commit rank murder, to terminate the life of a fellow-creature with every right to enjoy health and happiness, to turn a wife into a widow, to render her children orphans, to wreck a peaceful home in a doubtful effort to save my own skin. Never did I hate and despise myself more heartily in my earthly career, than I did now at this first desperate stroke for freedom in Meleager. God knows whether after all I might not have shrunk shamefacedly from the loathsome act, had I allowed my thoughts thus to ramble farther in these ethical convolutions of right and wrong. But as I still hesitated, I suddenly observed the unsuspecting soldier deliberately stop, lay aside his spear, and with unconcern kneel down to fasten the loosened thong of his sandal. At such an opportunity some force—was it moral or physical?—impelled me, and with a spring that would have done credit to a young cat-a-mountain, I had leaped on the bending figure whose startled head was swiftly swathed in the thick folds of my royal robe. There was some struggling, as well as

faint muffled cries, whilst I tightly clenched the half-smothered head beneath my left arm. I then transferred the dagger from my teeth to my right hand and skilfully inserted the keen blade into my captive's reins. The struggles increased, then relaxed, then faded into a series of convulsive twitchings; till I felt my hand grow wet and warm with the blood I was shedding for my own selfish purpose. Still I continued to hold the knife in its soft fleshy socket, until with a final twisting of the steel in the mode of the Spanish assassin, I slowly withdrew the weapon from the fatal gash. All things appear mercifully of a neutral tint on a moonless night, so that I was spared the chief horror of my ensanguined hands and tunic, for I greatly dislike the sight of blood. I next gently unwound my cloak from the dead man's face, and then dragged the corpse across the path to lay it behind a large clump of agaves. A small pool of stagnant water hard by enabled me to remove the gore from my hands and garments, whilst a neighbouring bank of lush couch grass assisted in the cleansing of my dagger, which I wiped and wiped again before I replaced it in its scabbard. These necessary operations afforded me space to breathe, to recuperate and to reflect.

The primal instinct of self-preservation being thus fulfilled, I returned to my scheme. With my unshod feet I walked slowly up to the guard-house, whence issued unmistakable sounds of deep slumber.

I even ventured to peep through the open window, so as to catch a glimpse of four or five soldiers within, all sleeping on mattresses beneath the subdued rays of a great guard lanthorn. Quitting the building I found no obstacle in crossing the bridge, but soon after reaching its farther end I nearly met with an unexpected calamity. Groping in the gloom of a thicket of pines I suddenly felt my movements hampered, to discover just in time that I had inadvertently stumbled against a stout cord. There could be little question as to its import and object; it was a cord of inter-communication that was stretched from the temple above to the guard-house below. My good genius was certainly in close attendance on me that most memorable night, for had I tripped over this rope and set the alarm signal in motion, there could have been only one result to my escapade. As it so happened, I was not a little assisted by my discovery. In the first place, I neatly severed the cord itself, and then proceeded to fasten each of the divided ends with a clove hitch to a bough so that in the possible event of the guard at the bridge or the watchers in the temple wishing to communicate, their efforts would be nullified. Also I perceived that by following the direction of the cord, I should pursue the easiest way of ascent to the temple itself.

Bestowing a delicate touch from time to time on the friendly clue, I hurried upward, treading a well-worn path through the hanging woods that in

daylight, or possibly even in moonlight, would have been sufficiently simple and obvious to the pedestrian. So rapid and unimpeded were my steps that I was out of breath by the time I reached the huge bastions that overtopped the forest trees and uplifted the main platform of the temple. Here I rested a while, and then once more, with the aid of the cord, lighted on a narrow winding stairway which I ascended with infinite caution. Arrived almost at the head of the steps, I kneeled down and very slowly raised my eyes above the level of the low parapet. What I now descried was a long narrow space, perhaps four hundred feet in length, which served as platform to an immense plain building with a lofty roof. Its long lateral extent disclosed a number of doors flush with the exterior wall and all of identical design. Even more exciting to me however than this gigantic edifice was the apparition of a white-robed guardian pacing slowly along the terrace. Towards this new opponent I entertained none of those scruples that had racked me before hurling myself on the unfortunate sentry below; but I realised the extreme danger and delicacy of the situation. The councillor, whose identity I could not discover owing to the prevailing gloom, paraded the terrace from end to end, the conclusion of his paces bringing him within a few yards of the spot where I knelt hunched below the parapet with my fingers on the handle of my hunting knife. But he noticed nothing, and turning again towards the east

began to retrace his steps. When he had retired some distance, I darted from my hiding-place to examine the nearest of the doors. But there was no sign of any means of ingress either in that door, or in its neighbour, or in the door beyond. Having hazarded so much, I hastened back to my niche, there to await the return of this nocturnal watcher. In my mind, that knew time was of the essence of my final success, I was still debating whether to spring upon the approaching senator, or to make one more effort to enter the temple, when my good genius again solved my perplexity. Of a sudden I grew aware of a curious rustling sound in the tree-tops, and a second later a large drop of water plashed on my upturned face. Soon rain was pattering heavily on all around, and by the time the councillor had reached the tether of his promenade he began to feel the effects of this unexpected drenching. I saw him pause, hold out both hands to test the violence of the sudden shower, fling his cloak over his head, and then make a precipitate and somewhat undignified rush for the shelter of the building. With straining eyeballs I watched him pass each doorway till he paused at the seventh from the end, which admitted him without impediment of any kind. Still in bent posture I hurried in his footsteps through the hissing downfall, caught the swinging door before it had ceased to oscillate, and noiselessly insinuated myself within the portal. I was fully nerved for an immediate struggle, but on entering

I perceived that the senator had already walked ahead some paces towards the eastern end of the huge building, and was evidently still unaware of the presence of an unauthorised visitor. Shrinking behind a pillar or buttress, I waited in patient silence for the next turn of Fortune's wheel, which was certainly revolving fast and furious that night.

So far as I could observe in the faint and flickering light I was standing within a vast barrel-vaulted erection with pillared alcoves on either side, reminding me somewhat of an immense Renaissance church. There was artificial lighting somewhere, but I failed to trace its whereabouts; the western end of the building lay in inky shadow, but its eastern extremity was open and exposed to the air. The central portion was largely occupied by a long abyss which appeared to be a species of graving dock, and resting on metal lines that ran the whole length of this hollow space were four or more bulky vessels constructed of some silver-glinted material not unlike aluminium.

Far from inspiring terror the sombre novelty of the place engendered in me a thrill of exultation, even of satisfaction, in the thought that I had indeed penetrated to the very heart of The Secret. Of my two guiding emotions at this moment an overwhelming curiosity—the unflinching curiosity of the Caliph Vathek and his mother Carathis in the fatal halls of Eblis—was perhaps predominant; but almost equally potent was the itching to revenge

myself on the treacherous hierarchy of Meleager. Meanwhile the footfalls of the unsuspecting guardian of the place echoed faintly in the distance, and I could detect the silhouette of his form against the background of open space to the east. Slowly the figure returned, perhaps to repass the door, for the storm without had abated and the sky was clearing. Nearer he drew and nearer, so that in the superior light of the building I could at last distinguish the individual features of the councillor. It was Marzona, Arch-priest.

This sudden recognition caused me to start, so that possibly I may have emitted some betraying noise to call attention to my presence, though what ensued before the actual impact I am still puzzled to say. For in a trice I found myself and Marzona locked together in a deadly but silent embrace, since instinctively it would seem I had posed for action with my cloak as on the previous encounter at the bridge. For a second time I held my antagonist's head enveloped in those ample folds, albeit his limbs were unembarrassed. We were knotted, I say, in a death grip, swaying from side to side, our hatred oozing as it were from our very pores, as we strained and wrestled with furious determination. Naturally, I was the taller and the stronger of the two, but intensity of hate gives an additional stimulus, and that advantage perhaps Marzona could claim. Vainly did I struggle to utilise my dagger; try as I would, it was all I could contrive with my superior

strength to keep Marzona's head tightly swathed and his limbs powerless to inflict an injury. How long this embittered duel might have lasted, and with what final result, I cannot tell, had not a false step on my enemy's part brought him perilously near the edge of the central abyss. Another step, and his left foot was treading in vacuity. He reeled; made one despairing but ineffectual effort to drag me with him in his disaster; and then I saw him, with my cloak still encompassing his head, fall headlong into that gaping pit beside us. There followed a dull faint thud of contact with something far below, and then I found myself kneeling hot and exhausted on the brink of that fatal chasm. Very warily did I lean forward to peer down and to listen, but there was nothing but blackness and silence in those impenetrable depths.

V

After some minutes spent in useless speculation I rose from my knees and proceeded to explore the building, for I knew I must hasten. With feelings compact of awe and interest I approached the weird monsters of metal that stood reposing on their sustaining rails, and growing bolder I actually entered the vessel that was nearest to the broad eastern exit. I experienced no difficulty in descending into what I can best describe as a moderate-sized cabin with two smaller closets adjoining. Standing on its hinges at right angles to the cabin was the great lid of the airship. In this modified twilight I had no trouble in picking my steps, but a minute survey of details demanded a much stronger light. Nevertheless, I could distinguish directions in Latin painted on various parts of the cabin, and it was during a strained examination of one of these notices that I must have inadvertently touched or trodden on the concealed spring, which again was destined by my abiding good angel to prove my next instrument of salvation. A gentle humming or whirring seemed to vibrate around me, beginning very softly but gradually rising in intensity so that in alarm I prepared to quit the ship and regain the floor. But before I could collect my dazed thoughts

into sufficient concert to act at all, I became aware of a soft gliding motion and actually perceived the long vista of the hall recede from my eyes, as I was slowly drifting through some unseen mechanical force out of the edifice and was being launched into the infinite beyond. With a joyful bound, so it seemed to me, my craft passed out of the open arching portal and was now running swiftly as though borne on invisible wires. I watched, as in a vision, the temple, mountain and shores of Meleager dwindle and diminish in my track, until they became mere outlines in the grey dimness that precedes the dawn. Still, as one fascinated, I could only stare and marvel, for the superfluity of adventures and wonders of this night had caused a sort of mental congestion of my brain. Suddenly I was once more recalled to the necessity of action, when I felt something hard pressing on my neck, and realised it was the cover of the airship closing gently of its own volition. Hurriedly I subsided into the well of the cabin with my eyes fixed on the slow descending cover, which finally settled down on the lower portion of the vessel like the lid of some Brobdingnagian snuff-box. Meanwhile I lay below, stupefied in an atmosphere which I soon found unpleasantly warm and also permeated with a subtle indescribable odour that at first produced a sense of nausea and of suffocation. However, by lying prone on a couch, for the cabin was furnished with tolerable comfort, these disagreeable symptoms

were mitigated, though throughout my long journey I never felt any desire to rise and move about by reason of my giddiness. I could see that the vessel was well supplied with provisions, mostly in liquid form; and in truth there was every arrangement for two or three persons to inhabit this hold without any marked discomfort for a considerable space of time. At intervals around the walls of the cabin were printed long sentences in Latin, interspersed with many technical terms in English, French and German wherever the classical tongue failed to express adequately the required meaning. All these notices related to the working of various levers and other pieces of mechanism on board, and as I lay reclined in a state of semi-consciousness I amused myself by deciphering these injunctions.

Time was practically non-existent during this mad whirling through aerial space, and as my capacity for further amazement was by now completely exhausted, I resigned myself to my present condition of a not unpleasant drowsiness, which made me indifferent as to whither my strange vehicle was bearing me. Day and night chased each other like alternate streaks of black and white; sunlight, moonlight, starlight, darkness, opacity in no wise concerned me during my voyage from the planet of Meleager. From time to time I sought to allay my constant thirst, or rather the irritating dryness of mouth and gullet (for I felt no hunger), with the contents of some of the numerous bottles

near me; and thus refreshed, I gladly returned to my couch and sank into my previous state of lethargy. As I lay thus, I often meditated on the past, but of the present and the future I felt utterly careless and apathetic.

How long this hurtling through the empyrean lasted I cannot say; presumably there were instruments on board for computing the speed of the machine and other statistics, but I never sought to discover such appliances. Rarely too did I care to gaze out of the many port-hole windows, for the sight of the circumambient waves of empty space induced in me a horrible sense of dizziness. So I remained thus prostrate in a half-sleeping, half-waking condition that for aught I knew or cared might be prolonged for eternity, until at last I was aroused from my somnolence by a faint icy breath falling on my face. On looking up I perceived the lid of my prison slowly opening, for all the world like the upper shell of some gigantic oyster, and the widening aperture was admitting draughts of fresh bracing air into the vitiated atmosphere of the cabin. Instinctively I knew we were entering the air-zone of the Earth. Strange sounds and clickings were now manifest in the unseen machinery; our motion became less rapid and regular; and these phenomena together with the bitter cold soon dispelled my torpor and brought me to my feet, for I could stand upright now that the lid of the vessel was raised on its hinges. Craning forward I saw

we were in truth nearing the Earth, though evidently at a relaxed rate of velocity; and fascinating it was to me to note the steady aggrandisement of the great orb of Mundus, as we drew perceptibly closer to its surface. Already the Eastern hemisphere was brilliantly defined, with Asia and the islands of the Orient all glowing in the flush of dawn, which was driving the lingering shadows of night to westward. A colossal globe of gold and azure and sable was slowly revolving under my eyes, which remained in fixed contemplation of an expanding scene that none save a few enraptured mystics or poets have ever aspired to describe.

With the keen draughts of air on my face and in my lungs I began to foreshadow my ultimate goal. The vessel which had so far carried me faithfully and smoothly was now beginning to flag and oscillate in so alarming a manner that I felt my attention was urgently demanded for its mechanical needs. The inscribed directions at once engaged my feverish attention, but so excited and over-hasty was I, that I set to working levers and pulling chains without grasping the full import of my movements. Eagerly I essayed to steer towards the British Isles, on which my gaze was concentrated, but my efforts to utilise this superb masterpiece of mechanism fell below my intentions. In a series of irregular spirals the great airship continued to descend, nor with all my frenzied manipulation of its levers and handles and pulleys could I persuade it to alter its

course; down, down it dropped until I realised nothing could save me now from the wilderness of ocean beneath. How cruel my fate! To sail thus from the stars to the Earth only to be engulfed and choked in the barren salt waters! What a mean conclusion to a divine adventure! Not terror, but fierce disappointment was my prevailing emotion, as mounting to the rim of the cabin I made ready to leap at the precise moment the misguided vessel should strike the surface of the sea.

I have only a faint reminiscence of a sharp plunge and recovery; of a glimpse of my aerial chariot being swallowed in the surge; of a dull roar of explosions, before I found myself swimming or floating in calm tepid waters which were all tinged with the carnation and primrose and pearly tints of a glorious summer sunrise, whilst above my head hung the vast impassive dome of heaven flecked with cirrus clouds all gold and saffron. Even so there sprouted in my brain the vain conceit that to perish thus in mid-ocean all aglow with prismatic hues was no ill-fitting termination to the career of a monarch of Meleager. Thus did Icarus reason perhaps when his pinions melted in the envious sunbeams and he fell into the classic sea that henceforth assumed his illustrious name. It would have been in keeping with the late web of wonders spun around me if I were to find old Neptune in person ready to receive me with a bevy of ivory-armed nereids to bewail my comely corpse or an escort of

tritons to announce my passing on their raucous conches. Like the hero of the Puritan poet, I still contrived to hug my majesty even in my fall from heaven; and the sick fancy seemed to support me as I struggled in the translucent swell. Involuntarily my eyes closed, as I finally abandoned myself to —what? Surely but to the next miracle, to the next freak of Fortune which had guided her favourite hitherto?

Strange noises echoed in my ears; I was rescued; I recognised my salvage without surprise and without enthusiasm. It was my due. No dolphin-mounted Neptune came to claim me; no nereid or triton stirred in my behalf; but the Man who ascended to the Stars was not destined to die by drowning. I sensed the familiar timbre of English voices close at hand; I felt a firm but kindly grip upon my shoulder; I suffered a painful but dexterous hoisting over a gunwale; I was lying in the stern of a boat, whose rowers were panting from recent effort; I was safe in the custody of my own Herthian countrymen.

VI

Perhaps I can plead insensibility for not recalling my further experiences in the row-boat or in my transmission thence to the steamship *Orissa*, to which the smaller craft belonged. For I remember nothing of the happenings between the moment of my rescue in the water and my deposition in a narrow white-painted cabin of the British vessel. Here my sodden tunic and vest were removed, not without expressions of astonishment on the part of the stewards, to be replaced by some ugly flannel sleeping garments. An attempt on their part to detach the little leather bag and gold chain from my neck was stoutly resisted, and eventually I was permitted to retain them. Some hot vinous potion was poured with well-intentioned effort down my reluctant throat, and perhaps as a result of this characteristic Herthian hospitality, I soon fell into a dreamless refreshing slumber which must have endured some hours.

When I awoke it was still daylight, and on opening my eyes they at once rested on the figure of a man seated by my bedside, who was evidently watching me with the deepest concern. His countenance, which appealed to my fastidious taste, was honest, intelligent and kindly, though its features were rugged and suggestive of humble origin. From his

grizzled hair and heavily lined face I concluded him to be on the border-line of old and middle age, perhaps some sixty years old. Our two pairs of eyes met in a searching but friendly survey, after which encounter I smiled graciously, as I should smile upon one of my nobles in Meleager, and at the same time extended my hand for salutation. Naturally it was not kissed—how could I expect such behaviour from a Herthian equal?—but it was clasped with a gentle reassuring pressure that in no wise prejudiced me against my companion, who after a pause began to address me. His voice owned the same quality as his features, and was by no means spoiled by a trace of north-country doric that still lingered in his speech. His opening questions were of the usual type that would be found in the secular rituale (did such a compilation exist), in the section relating to the case of a ship-wrecked waif. To these I replied in a brief and (I fear) obscurantist manner. That my questioner was equally puzzled and interested, I could easily see; so that I found a somewhat malicious amusement in increasing his perplexity. Contrariwise, I soon began to examine my would-be interrogator much in the style I might have employed towards dear old Anzoni or Hiridia. My new friend seemed somewhat surprised, but good-naturedly supplied all the information I sought, whereby I learned that the ship now sheltering me was the *Orissa*, of seven thousand tons' burden, a cargo-boat of the

Pheon Line but also carrying first-class passengers, on her way home to Liverpool from Rangoon. It would appear that the officer on the bridge at break of day had seen the airship strike the water and disappear at no great distance on our port side, and had promptly given orders for a boat to be lowered to effect a rescue. On nearing the scene of the recent disaster I had been found floating in an apparently unconscious state but otherwise uninjured by my late shock and immersion. He himself was Doctor Charles Wayne, a native of Cumberland and until lately a medical practitioner in Burmah, where he had spent most of his life in Government service. He was now returning home on a pension in his sixty-second year. He was a widower without children. The *Orissa* had passed through some exciting experiences in her voyage from Suez to Gibraltar, for on their way they had learned of the declaration of war between Germany and Britain. They had hurried with a sharp look-out by day and with darkened decks at night through the Mediterranean for fear of prowling German cruisers, so that all aboard were impatient to make the mouth of the Mersey without any delay or mishap.

Here indeed was startling news! I had been absent barely seven years in Meleager, and now on my return to the progressive Earth, which I had left prattling of universal peace, I was confronted by the outbreak of a European conflict on a vast scale. There had certainly been wars and rumours

of war in plenty during the past half-century, but such barbaric terrors I used to be assured were the mere dying echoes of the moribund volcano of militarism, and that before us there extended a blessed and endless period of peace, wherein moral education, increasing wages and salaries, dissent, teetotalism and other blessings of equal value were to be the special marks of a glorious democratic era that would have no termination.

"They manage these things better in Meleager," I half muttered to myself, whilst Dr Wayne continued to expatiate to me on the bellicose attitude of the Hohenzollerns, on the magnificent patriotism of the French politicians, of the foresight and skill displayed by our own ministers of state, and of the lofty altruism of the Tsar. I listened, but without the attention that the exceptional nature of the case seemed to demand. Somehow it merely appeared to me that the mundane kaleidoscope had only sustained another vigorous revolution, and that the scarlet of human riot and unrest was in reality no more predominant now than in the previous arrangement of its component colours. And yet I should be doing myself an injustice were I to speak of my lack of interest concerning this stupendous piece of news; although at the same time I found myself surveying this newest phase of the world's progress with the cold aloofness of an external critic from some distant planet—which attitude after all exactly fitted my case. Thus I fell once more into a reverie on the

relative values of human happiness and human progress, that theme whereon I had so often argued with my councillors in my deserted palace at Tamarida.

I spent a restful night lulled by the throbbing of the engines and the swirling of the waters displaced by our keel. The good doctor slept on the cabin sofa opposite my berth, and once or twice rose in the night hours to attend to my wants. On the following morning I had completely recovered, and news to this effect having been bruited throughout the ship, various uninvited visitors came to inspect the castaway in Dr Wayne's cabin. At my urgent entreaty I was spared a good many of these intrusions, but my kind protector could not well exclude the baboon-faced captain, whose empurpled visage framed in masses of ochre hair thrust itself more than once through the doorway and inquired in rasping accents after my welfare. The bibulous ship's surgeon too invaded my retreat, and expressed a desire to astonish my stomach with special concoctions of his own mixing. Good Dr Wayne did all that was possible to save me from these well-meaning persons, and finally he closed the cabin door on the pretence of my exhaustion. Left thus in peace, my companion began to address me seriously in regard to certain matters. I had so far refrained from giving the name I bore on earth, and was firmly resolved not to betray it, nor could any attempt draw the required information from me. Acknowledging his failure, the Doctor with a

sigh of resignation desisted to apply, at the same time begging me to mention some name, a fictitious one if I were so minded, for the benefit of the authorities on landing. The suggestion seemed reasonable enough, and after some further parley I agreed to accept temporarily the absurd name of Theodore King, concerning which Dr Wayne made some jocose observations. In the name then of Theodore King, man rescued at sea in latitude 38° by longitude 18° or thereabouts, was my official report endorsed, and in this nominal disguise I was eventually disembarked at Liverpool stage.

But for the all-pervading sensation caused by the recent declaration of war and the many ramifying minor excitements of the moment, I much doubt whether this ingenious attempt at self-concealment would have succeeded so easily. But for this crucial event I might easily have become a centre of inquisitive interest that would have caused great inconvenience and delay; as it so fell, however, everybody on board the *Orissa* was far too engrossed with the supreme agitation of the moment to pay much attention to the eccentric, not to say insane, individual who had been picked up from a collapsed aeroplane off the coast of Portugal.

With special insistence and appeal and with arguments whose soundness I was forced to admit, I had even allowed Dr Wayne to clip my superabundant locks, and had likewise consented to clothe myself in a tolerable suit of blue serge, which he

had begged from a good-natured passenger of unusual height. Thus clad and groomed, I managed to leave the boat in company with my careful protector without exciting overmuch curiosity either from my fellow-travellers of the *Orissa* or from the crowd on the landing-stage. After a certain amount of staring and a good many inquiries, which Dr Wayne skilfully parried, I found myself in a cab loaded with the Doctor's luggage jolting through the squalid streets of Liverpool on our way to a hotel. Here we spent a few hours in a private room, surrounded by masses of newspapers which my companion set to study with intense eagerness.

And here I shall digress a little in order to confront a real difficulty of understanding which must have already struck the reader. How evolved it that a complete stranger like Dr Charles Wayne allowed himself to be so burdened with such an incubus as myself? That is a query, I admit, which none save Dr Wayne is competent to answer, but I suspect even he can hardly solve the difficulty satisfactorily. When he comes to read these pages in due course, he may conceivably be able to say, "It was this," or "It was that, which not only aroused my interest in this mysterious being but also impelled me to serve and obey him henceforward." Yet even then I think he will fail to analyse truthfully the different motives which induced him thus to surrender his own freedom of action and to place himself without a murmur at my disposal. It may

have been my piteous condition of solitude; it may have been my almost unearthly beauty of form and face; it may have been my uncanny misfortune out in mid-ocean; it may have been my quiet arrogance and originality of demeanour; it may have been his professional curiosity in a prospective patient;—it may have been one, or some, or all, or none of these things which contributed to his subservience. I cannot tell, and I feel Dr Wayne may be no wiser in the matter than myself. Sometimes I imagine that some faint exhalation of the supernatural must cling around my person, for it does not seem impossible to me that after adventures such as mine a delicate psychical fragrance (if I may so dare to describe that which is in reality indescribable) may permeate my bodily husk. Such an aroma, though but dimly comprehended, might admittedly prove of irresistible attraction to that rare spiritual type of humanity to which I strongly hold Dr Wayne to belong in spite of his homely exterior. I trust he will pardon the apparent impertinence of this statement, since it proceeds from the sole being who has been able to discover and appreciate the inherent sweetness and strength of his soul within. And for my own part I am often haunted by the notion, which I have scarcely the temerity to express in writing, that it was not the mere mundane accident of an accident that led Dr Wayne to embark on the *Orissa* where later on he was brought into such close contact with myself in my hour of need.

VII

We left Liverpool in the late hours of a brilliant August afternoon on our way to London. Throughout the journey southward I lay back dreamily in my seat, watching each receding vista and appreciating all with the dual interest of recollection and novelty. I preferred to recline thus in silence, and my companion, whose frequent inquisitions of my face in no wise disturbed me, seemed disinclined to resent my mood. Arrived at Euston we proceeded to a certain hotel on the Embankment which perpetuates a historic name and whose latter-day luxury is tempered by the near presence of a mouldy but modernised chapel, that can still claim to be a royal appanage. Dr Wayne had at first demurred to my choice of this particular hostelry, which is decidedly not celebrated for the moderation of its bills; but as in all else his opposition soon relaxed before my repeated desire. Accordingly it was I who engaged what I deemed a convenient and adequate suite of rooms, wherein we installed ourselves without further ado. My new surroundings in many ways attracted me, and we had not been an hour in the hotel before I was ensconced in a corner of the exiguous balcony outside our windows, lost in contemplation of the noble tawny flood

swirling seaward through lines of sparkling lamps. Before retiring to sleep, however, I deemed it only fair to allay the evident apprehensions of Dr Wayne concerning expense. Accordingly I produced and untied my small leather wallet, emptying its shower of flashing jewels on to a table beneath a powerful electric lamp. The Doctor, who owned some superficial acquaintance with the science of metallurgy, was amazed at this sudden display of concentrated wealth, and henceforward appeared fully reconciled to our present mode of life.

[I may add here also that in the course of the next few days my friend carried a portion of these superb gems to a diamond merchant in the city who was personally known to him. This London dealer, so Dr Wayne informed me, could not repress his admiration of these glittering trifles, which, in spite of the unfavourable condition of the market induced by the war, he was soon able to dispose of, presumably with a handsome commission for his services. Be that as it may, a sum of eight hundred pounds was thus realised, and this money I insisted on Dr Wayne, to his evident reluctance, placing to his credit at his own bank. "Point d'argent; point de Londres"; at any rate I had solved for the nonce any question of financial difficulties.]

My impressions of London were so confused in this early stage of the great European War that I see little gain in attempting to crystallise my feelings into any sort of description. Indeed, I found it well-

nigh impossible to attune my own thoughts to the popular attitude of the moment; but then I never ceased to remind myself that of necessity I was detached from a purely patriotic outlook owing to my long residence in Meleager with its consequent effects on a plastic mind that had definitely grown to regard the Earth and all therein as things left behind for evermore. The excited talk and scandal of the hotel corridors, the sheaves of redundant telegrams affixed from time to time on the public screens, the yells of the newsvendors, the headlines of the popular journals announcing English, French, Russian, Belgian and Servian victories in endless succession; the *brouhaha* of the streets and the gossip of the boudoir, all alike left me cold and phlegmatic. Dr Wayne used to read aloud to me daily from half-a-dozen papers, for I had signally failed to reacquire my long-suspended love of reading; but I was unable to grasp more than the patent fact that the fate of Paris was hanging in the balance:—Paris, the city of light and leadership; Paris the capital of Saint Louis, of Henry of Navarre, of Louis le Roi Soleil, of Napoleon Buonaparte; Paris, the erstwhile acme of my earthly ideals. Doubtless it was my own obliquity and rustiness of mind that caused this lamentable lack of comprehension of the situation as a whole, and prevented me from viewing it through those same rosy glasses of insular humour wherewith the bulk of my countrymen were regarding the trend of passing events

on the Continent. I knew myself to be at best an amphibian, with my body on Earth and my heart in Meleager, yet capable of a residence in either planet. I felt lost and lonely in this city of reek and confusion, whose inhabitants probably outnumbered the whole tale of my own forsaken people. After a week or so I ceased to find solace in wandering amid streets and churches and galleries, and spent more hours than ever in musing with my eyes directed towards the river, the shipping and the steeples that clove the hot blue August sky. Dr Wayne meanwhile was busied with many matters, such matters as would presumably engage the attention of a time-expired Indian public servant; and from my peculiar tincture of indifference I was equally resigned to his absence or his presence, provided only he did not desert me, of which contingency I had no fear whatsoever.

With the sudden salvation of Paris at a critical moment and the ensuing German retreat from the Marne, the cloud of foreboding was partially lifted from me, without however quickening any fresh growth of interest within. Yet I listened to Dr Wayne's daily budget of news, and comported myself with conventional intelligence on the rare occasions that I found myself brought into contact with the Doctor's friends, who apparently regarded me as an interesting case, a sort of God's fool, in Dr Wayne's charge, in which impression I was naturally averse to undeceive them, for such a view at present suited my comfort and convenience.

September was now well advanced, and I much doubt if ever I should have achieved the desire, still less the determination, to leave a place I felt too languid to dislike but for a critical incident which I was half-hoping, half-dreading to occur. One afternoon Dr Wayne entered my room in an excited state and with unwonted heat began to dilate on a curious adventure he had just experienced in the hotel itself. It seems that on his return he noticed in the vestibule of the hall two diminutive swarthy foreigners seated in the middle of a miscellaneous mass of rugs, shawls, laces, cushions, ornaments of brass and other objects, all of Oriental appearance, though the Doctor assured me of obvious British or German manufacture. Dr Wayne, who, as I have already hinted, was an enthusiastic patriot, became somewhat nettled on seeing all this trumpery displayed for sale during so serious an epoch, albeit several expensively dressed women were already hovering round the men and their wares, like moths attracted to some sugary compound. The vendors, who had graceful manners and spoke fluent though broken English, called themselves vaguely "Indians," which statement on Dr Wayne's searching questions they qualified by remarking they were loyal subjects of the Indian Empire. The Doctor's rising suspicions were by no means appeased by this explanation; but on finding that the hotel servants as well as the hovering females resented his method of cross-examination, and were inclined to champion these

Eastern peddlers, he ultimately desisted and retreated upstairs to vent his tale into my ears. I listened to him with that polite aloofness which has grown to be a second habit of nature with me, at first with faint attention, but ere long as he proceeded with intense though concealed agitation. For the detailed description of the pair of merchants in the hall below promptly convinced me of the accuracy of my first impression—that these Indian peddlers were no other than envoys from Meleager who had traced their erring King hither.

I wonder if my reader has ever experienced Fear. And by Fear I do not mean mere fright, or terror, or alarm, or other mental spasms with which Fear is so often vulgarly confused. If he reads Mr Kipling's poems about Mowgli, the little hunter of the jungle, he will obtain some inkling of that mysterious emotion which is in reality man's tribute to a relentless destiny.

"Very softly down the glade runs a waiting watching shade,
And the whisper spreads and widens far and near;
And the sweat is on thy brow, for he passes even now—
He is Fear, O little Hunter, he is Fear!
. . . . . .
And thy throat is shut and dried, and thy heart against thy side
Hammers: Fear, O little Hunter—this is Fear."

Yes, Fear in one aspect is a physical recognition of the existence and the approach of the Unknown; and its external symptoms are first of all an involuntary erection of the hair of the head, a sensation

of intense heat in the scalp and a subsequent exudation of chill sweat over the body, which last offers some relief to the internal or psychical lesion caused by Fear. I endured it then, as I suddenly realised in the midst of Dr Wayne's half-humorous discourse that I was a fly caught in the web of Fate; a victim rotating on the wheel of destiny; an atom of humanity that was urgently required for the completion of some great cosmic design. . . .

It passed; thank God, It passed; and moreover It left me stronger and wiser than before. Very likely those honest penetrating grey eyes of my companion detected my fleeting wave of anguish, but he only kept an eloquent silence; and when a few minutes later I expressed a wish to descend and interview these alleged Indian wanderers, he offered neither comment nor opposition.

On reaching the vestibule I found the two foreign traders conversing amiably with a youthful frock-coated manager, for the fashionable ladies had evacuated the hall in pursuit of the tea and the music which were being provided in a distant chamber. At my approach the Indians took no farther notice of me than by smiling blandly and by indicating the various articles spread at their feet. Meanwhile the supercilious young manager addressed me: "Your friend Dr Wayne seems to think we are encouraging spies or bad characters here; but so far as I can judge, these men are only Indian hucksters, and several of our ladies are very pleased

with the bargains they have bought this afternoon. What do you make of them, sir?"

"I believe," said I slowly, envisaging the two Meleagrian nobles, envoys to our Earth disguised in the mean garments of Oriental mountebanks, "from their features and their dress these men hail from the Nicobar Islands, where I once held an official post."

And in the most natural and condescending manner I could command I straightway began to question the two smiling pseudo-merchants in Meleagrian.

"Are you here in order to kill me?"

To which sentence with a grin of pleased recognition and a sweeping obeisance the elder of the pair replied with downcast eyes:

"Far be such evil thoughts from us! We seek to entreat your Majesty's return to your sorrowing subjects in Meleager!"

"Aha!" cried I trumphantly in English to the admiring clerk; "they *are* Nicobarians!" (I might just as safely have styled them Baratarians so far as he was concerned!) "I thought I could not be mistaken."

And thus the serious farce continued to be enacted for some little time in the presence of an outsider, all blissfully ignorant of the fact that he was overhearing a colloquy of prime importance between two ambassadors of another planet and their runaway king.

I need not add that I was successful in convincing the worthy manager of the genuine character and

zealous loyalty of these two dwellers in one of the obscure outlying dependencies of our Indian Empire, so that he was in excellent temper when a sudden summons called him away to the telephone. His withdrawal enabled us to continue our conversation with greater ease, my interlocutors imploring me to reconsider my decision to remain on Earth. Not to prolong this narrative, I shall only add here that finally I consented to meet these envoys again after an interval of one month, by which date I hoped to arrive at a definite decision as to my future course of action. In any event, I pleaded for a breathing-space wherein to digest all the extraordinary adventures of the past few months. Finally, though not over-willingly, they consented to this respite, and then in token of our mutual pact we three simultaneously in accordance with the Meleagrian practice touched our breasts with all ten fingers, a gesture that implies a most solemn oath in cases where the more elaborate ritual is undesirable or difficult to effect.

My last question was directed to their possible difficulty in tracing my whereabouts, for having formed no plans I could not therefore inform them of my movements. But such an objection evidently offered no difficulties to the Meleagrians who only smiled and straightway began to proffer me certain of their goods with a noisy plausibility that formed a perfect imitation of the methods of that humble class whose functions and personality they had usurped. I at once set to chaffer with affected

eagerness, with the result that a returning queue of bedizened leaders of fashion, the majority of them with cigarettes in their mouths, entered the hall in time to observe a tall, fair and distinguished-looking gentleman (obviously an Englishman) finally decide to purchase for three guineas a long, soft chuddah shawl which its vendor was folding and twirling before his eyes with easy grace. Having secured my shawl with the requisite cash, the second trader now sidled towards me holding in both his slender brown hands an ornamental casket which he pressed upon me with many encomiums in quaint broken English. A mere flicker of light in the tail of his eye afforded me the necessary hint to accept the box, for which I paid a pound or so. The Indian then wrapped my bargain with much ceremony in blue crinkled paper and carefully deposited it in my hands, wherein it lay heavy as lead. There followed a casual nod on my part, met by elegant salaams to the wealthy sahib, and the next moment I was ascending the staircase with my shawl and box, pursued by the inquiring glances of the astonished ring of ladies.

On gaining my bedroom I cautiously unlocked the casket, which I found was filled to overflowing with English sovereigns and bank-notes. I did not happen to need them, but at least I was touched by the agreeable thought that the donors did not desire their king to suffer the straits of penury in the coming interval of waiting.

VIII

I FOUND Dr Wayne quite ready to acquiesce in my newly formed decision to leave London; indeed, I fancy he still owned some qualms concerning the style and expense of our present abode. The only question that now remained was whither should we proceed. It was the Doctor and not myself who ultimately settled this point, for he had set to search the advertisement columns of his numerous journals, and after much hesitation had lighted on the notice of a Welsh hotel which on reflection commended itself also to my choice. The place was named Glanymôr and was situated on the southern shores of Cardigan Bay at a convenient distance from a small county town. It doubtless possessed the double advantage of quiet and remoteness, the two qualities of locale I especially demanded, so that after some farther discussion I asked Dr Wayne to make the necessary arrangements for our proposed sojourn there. In four days' time therefore from the date of the incident of the Indian peddlers, we were able to leave Paddington Station on our way towards the spot selected, where I looked to obtain the peace and solitude essential for me to refresh my jaded brain and to provoke it to some definite conclusion. I left London without a pang of regret,

but also without any pleasurable enthusiasm for the change of air and scene I was seeking; so languid and detached was my outlook towards the future.

After several hours of travelling westward, after noon we reached a large market town of South Wales where a hired motor car was awaiting us. It was a glorious day, cool, calm and bright, with the tang of autumn in the air but the guise of summer still masking the face of Nature. Ere long we were speeding through a district of tall hazel hedges and small fields in endless succession, recalling at times an immense rural chess-board set amidst steep hills of no distinction of outline but with their grassy flanks relieved in many places by patches of autumnal gorse, of roseate ling and of murrey bracken. Little rills, peeping through miniature thickets of delicate lady fern, coursed here and there down the slopes, and at times we were skirting the bank of a torrent with golden-brown peat-stained waters circling and curling around mossy boulders. In many places the hedge banks were still gay with hawkweeds, scabious and belated foxgloves. Already the charm of the revisited Earth was beginning to arouse my sluggish spirits, and the sight of this mountain brook with its suggestions of a happy childhood that delighted in rambling and fishing began to stir the clogged and mantled pool of my earthly memory. Here at any rate was still the Earth, the beloved Earth radiant and unspoiled, the Earth untainted by the deadly

miasma of modern progress which is striving with too evident success to convert the whole world into grey suburban uniformity and ugliness. Next we sped through a squalid hamlet compact of raw stuccoed chapels, of tin-roofed cottages and blatant villas of shrieking prosperity; and the late burgeoning of my earthy affections was rudely nipped. Nevertheless, we had soon quitted the ghastly modern township with its ill-dressed and ill-favoured inhabitants, and started to descend by a long gentle declivity to a broad bottom, for we were crossing the lofty watershed between two important Welsh rivers. We finally reached a wide valley cleft by a noble stream that was now a deep silent volume of water overhung by woods of oak and larch, and now a series of broad gushing shallows whose leaping waves broke merrily over opposing snags and rocks. At intervals we passed prosperous farms, old-fashioned country houses that seemed haunts of ancient peace, and stretches of rich pasture that were contiguous with the river's meanderings. Out of this delectable valley we ascended a sharp rise and, avoiding a moderate-sized country town, at length we reached an exposed hill-top which afforded us the prospect of the estuary of the river we had so lately left behind. Some two miles farther ahead our goal was attained, after traversing a tract of sand dunes whose desiccated soil gave sustenance to clumps of glaucous sea-holly and prickly bushes of the sand-rose that at this season

bore large sorbs of burnished purple. The hotel itself, a gaunt, rambling, recently erected structure, was perched on the rim of a precipitous range of cliffs. It was certainly a blot upon the landscape; but its interior promised solid comfort, whilst the hearty welcome of the landlord, bereft of his usual tale of summer boarders, made plenteous reparation for the lack of such luxury as we had bidden adieu to in London.

From the balcony outside our rooms upstairs there was a spacious and comprehensive view of the surrounding scenery. In front of us lay a broad basin enclosed in a broken circuit of rising ground and with the yellow sands and foaming bar of the issuing river in the middle distance. The opposite extremity of this half-enclosed sheet of water ended in a projecting rocky headland dotted with white-washed farmhouses and cottages, and barring the farther view of the coast-line to southward. Nearer at hand and adjacent to the inn there jutted forth the northern horn of the little bay, backed by the craggy islet of Ynys Ilar formed like a couched lion with his visage set towards the sinking sun. The rocky shores had assumed everywhere a purple-black tint against the pale blue of sea and sky, whilst inland the bleak unfertile soil showed brown and bare in the walled fields now denuded of their crops of oats and barley. I would not deny a certain inherent charm to the quiet scenery of Glanymôr, and possibly some landscape painter of

an unambitious type might have felt tempted to portray its sober tints and restful contours; but I myself experienced a sense of disappointment in what I deemed its negative character. Here was no savage majesty of nature; no sweep of limitless ocean; no thundering breakers on a boundless strand; no gloomy groves descending to the shore; no groups of gnarled and distorted pines that were eloquent of furious gales. And yet the features and general aspect of the place somehow imbued me with regretful thoughts of Tamarida, its haven and its twin promontories. For the first time a craving for my lost palace struck at my heart, as I gazed upon the encircling sweep of land and sea and sky. It may have been my fancy, but I thought I perceived a shadowy vision of that aerial city hover for a second like a mirage in the greyness of the dull horizon.

Our daily life at Glanymôr was placid and not unpleasant. The soft Welsh air, the perpetual sobbing of the sea beneath our windows, the peaceful atmosphere, the wholesome food all reacted on my overstrung nerves, which in time began to recover their wonted tone. I was braced by bathing in the Atlantic waters, icy-cold though they were; I appreciated my daily walks in company with Dr Wayne along the crest of the indented shore that faces the crags of Ynys Ilar. I mightily preferred the cries of the curlew and guillemot to the shouting of men and the hooting of cars in London. Altogether I was tolerably happy but for one drawback,

and this was my total inability to concentrate my thinking powers on the very subject I had travelled hither to study. Try as I would, I could not marshal my reasonings and calculations to meet in one point; and so I allowed the crucial question to remain unanswered, almost unattempted, and let myself drift with the current of my own indecision. Instead of racking my brain, I preferred to lie in some sheltered hollow of the rocks above the water, watching the waves collect and disperse with half-shut eyes that idly noted the dull yellow riband of tiny shells which marked the limits of the advancing and receding tides along the line of cliffs. Dr Wayne, in such hours as he could spare from his multiplicity of newspapers, was evidently studying me and my movements with silent interest, but we rarely spoke during our long walks above the coast-line or over the brown fallows and stony paths of the wind-swept treeless countryside.

Thus passed day after day of that precious interregnum, which ought to have been expended in constant deliberation and with the nicest weighing of advantages, instead of being frittered thus in yielding to an insistent temptation to somnolence and vacuity of mind. Perhaps there may have been some external unsuspected force, which was being directed against my own efforts of concentration to prevent my arriving at any conclusion. I had been the plaything of Fate for so long that possibly I may be excused for harbouring such a notion.

IX

A QUARTER of a mile behind our inn of Glanymôr stood the buildings of a fair-sized farm. I used often to walk to Pen Maelgwyn, whose name recalled that of a doughty Welsh chieftain slain in Plantagenet days, ascending the slope thither by means of a narrow footpath traversing the russet stubbles wherein still lingered a few gay marigolds and fragile poppies. The front of the house, a long low erection, was coloured a Naples yellow, but its roof and many clustering byres and sheds were all thickly coated wth dazzling whitewash. Above the porch and many windows set with diminutive panes had been painted ornamental stripes of black and vermilion in a local style that has now almost fallen out of fashion. Before the threshold lay a broad stone slab marked in chalk with elaborate patterns in rings and lines, which Dr Wayne, who is skilled in Celtic folk-lore, tells me is a relic of the dim past, when such tracery was designed to entice the good fairies indoors and at the same time to exclude any malignant elementals that might be skulking near. The whole length of the façade of the dwelling was distinguished by a narrow walled-in flower garden, wherein Mrs Mary Davies, the farmer's wife, cherished a number of gaudy dahlias,

Indian pinks, purple asters and tall spikes of golden-rod, these last being much patronised by a pair of elegant Red Admiral butterflies.

The messuage and its attendant buildings were wholly enclosed within a low rampart of rubble and loose boulders, also profusely daubed with the prevailing whitewash, this boundary wall surrounding an irregular space which included a round weed-covered pond and a number of middens for the cackling fowls of every condition—geese, chickens, ducks, turkeys and even peacocks. The yard was dirty, stony and unkempt, yet it possessed a certain fascination of its own, and there was a stile surmounting its haphazard parapet whereon I often sate, sometimes to watch the crowded life of the haggard, but more generally with my face turned towards the open sea. By directing my eyes hence in a sou'-westerly direction, so as to avoid the converging lines of the Welsh and Irish coasts, I had been told that nothing but the ocean with no intervening obstacle of land stretched between the cliffs of Glanymôr and the far-away coast of North America. There were no trees within a mile and more of Pen Maelgwyn, but the rough stone wall was heavily fringed with tall aromatic herbs such as tansy, wormwood and wild reseda to make amends for the total lack of arboreal verdure.

Hither then I often strolled during the morning hours when Dr Wayne was absorbed in his newspapers or his correspondence, and from the date of

my first intrusion at Pen Maelgwyn I always received a courteous welcome from Mr and Mrs Davies, the tenants of the place, who held a couple of hundred acres of varied but indifferent land. That Mr Hannaniah Davies belonged to the old school was evident from his speech, his dress and his professed outlook on life itself. Having served as bailiff for many years to a neighbouring squire he spoke English easily and correctly, and moreover with a well-bred accent. His wife Mary, on the other hand, could scarcely aspire to a word of any language save her native Welsh, so that our intercourse was of necessity confined to gesticulation and smiles, or to a few trivial phrases of which the expressions "Dim Saesneg" on her part and of "Dim Cymraeg" on mine, were perhaps the most lucid and useful. With Hannaniah however I often held converse—on the war, on politics, on travel, on religious controversy; and though he was bigoted and benighted in his tenets yet he could argue with politeness and good temper, which constitutes a virtue in itself, and that no common one. Our debates were usually held in the kitchen (which I vastly preferred to the chill musty parlour with its garish modern furniture and its repellent portraits of pastors and demagogues) and in this low warm cosy chamber I loitered for many a pleasant hour. The uneven stone floor was generally strewn with lily-white sand; the settle and chairs and dresser of pale Welsh oak shone brightly with Mary's affectionate polishing;

I loved the many quaint old jugs and plates which had happily escaped the accursed hand of the plundering collector. In the deep-set space of the sole window flourished Mary's winter garden, a miscellaneous series of pots and saucers containing a fine geranium, a fuchsia, a trailing white campanula, some musk and a bizarre vegetable of the leek family that resembled a shining green octopus set on end. Above our heads depended from the rafters fine hams and bunches of odorous sage and marjoram.

In this old-time chamber I often partook of my "merenda," which invariably consisted of a glass of buttermilk with one or two square currant-engrained biscuits known to the polite world as Garibaldis, but owning a less romantic if more descriptive name in the days of my boyhood. This matutinal hospitality, I may add, was repaid not in coin but by the loan of papers and periodicals which Hannaniah read by the aid of a pair of antiquated spectacles, that reposed on the great sheepskin folio Welsh Bible always ready for use. Thus alternately reading aloud and discoursing, with Mary's clogs clattering in and out of the fragrant kitchen, I often succeeded in making the worthy Hannaniah waste an hour or more of his valuable agricultural time in the course of the morning.

A calendar month had already elapsed since our arrival at Glanymôr, and I was beginning to wonder in what guise the waiting Meleagrian envoys would next present themselves. Yet although the month

had been fulfilled, with a few days to spare, I was still speculating as to how, when and where they would approach me. With my mind absorbed in anticipation and replete with intense curiosity that was not tinctured by any alarm, I went one morning to Pen Maelgwyn on my usual errand, and on my arrival found my friend Hannaniah much excited over a matter of domestic concern, which he was eager to impart to me. It appeared that both Mr Davies's farm lads, English-speaking boys from a large industrial school of the Midlands, had been lately secured in the local recruiting nets, so that the farm itself was suffering in consequence of their departure. There were none to fill the vacant places, and so pressed was the farmer that two days ago he had been only too thankful to engage the temporary services of what he described as a "nigger tramp," who called himself an Indian. The new-comer certainly did not seem very proficient in the duties he declared himself willing to perform but he seemed intelligent and anxious to please; whilst on his side the sorely tried Hannaniah was thankful to obtain even such inferior assistance as this. There were hopes expressed that the strange heathen might in time develop into a fairly capable farm hand, and in this expectation even the suspicious Mrs Davies had agreed to lay aside her intense prejudice against the man's colour and appearance. Thus spake Hannaniah Davies; and I need not say that at this piece of news my heart began to hammer

at my ribs, though not (I can truthfully vouch) with fear, but rather with suppressed exaltation. For I felt thankful to be relieved at last from my long spell of uncertainty and indecision, than which any definite evil seemed almost preferable. The idea of coming action served to brace and vivify me, so that it required some restraint on myself to criticise the matter propounded by the farmer with the proper degree of calmness. I approved warmly his decision to employ the stranger, and then remarked with an air of indifference: "I wonder if by any chance I can speak your black man's language, if he is really an Indian, as he declares. I have spent many years among the natives of Hindostan, and I should much like to interview the man, whose name you tell me is Hamid."

I had scarcely finished speaking when Hannaniah, looking out of one of the tiny panes of thick greenish glass of the kitchen window, spied the subject of our conversation crossing the yard, and at my suggestion he beckoned him to approach the homestead. Mrs Davies, too, who had paused from her usual routine of scrubbing, was deeply interested, and in her native vernacular expressed her admiration for the powers of the Saxon gentleman who could speak the language of the blacks, for in her simple philosophy all dark-skinned foreigners owned but one lingo, whilst a multiplicity of tongues was a special privilege reserved for the Aryan race. Hannaniah was

no doubt more enlightened on such a point, but I fancy he had no fixed or correct views concerning Indians and negroes; it would therefore in no way be surprising to him, a good bilinguist, that anyone who had lived in the East like myself should understand the language of a wandering Oriental. He left the room, and I followed him into the soft breeze and the mellow October sunshine which was reviving Mary's rain-sodden dahlias round which the Red Admirals were hovering with brilliant if somewhat tattered wings.

The figure of the newly hired labourer could be observed slowly descending the long yard, for he was encumbered with a bundle of clover under his left arm, whilst his right side was heavily weighed down by a bucket of some provender for the calves. His garments formed a sort of ugly compromise between the costumes of East and West—a turban of soiled mauve muslin, a shabby threadbare brown coat and loose baggy trousers of canvas such as Levantine sailors affect. In this cheap and unattractive garb I quickly recognised Fajal, a leading member of the hierarchy of Meleager, and after Anzoni the most trustworthy and agreeable personage of all that august body to my mind. On our appearance in the yard the new servant halted a moment, placed the dirty bucket on the ground, and made an obeisance equally to Mr Davies and myself. As he bent before us in his squalid disguise, with his delicate shapely hands encrusted with barley-meal,

and with his shoddy boots all caked with filthy mud, I reflected and marvelled for a second or two on the inexorable sense of duty or responsibility which could compel such a man as Fajal, whose pedigree could easily vie with that of a Habsburg or a Colonna, to stoop to such abasement and to face such vicissitudes. Yet though he bent ragged and grimy and cringing before us, I could still detect the noble fruit concealed within the rugged husk, albeit such a gift of discrimination was wholly beyond the range of the farmer's blunter powers of perception and inferior knowledge of humanity. I addressed a few commonplace phrases in Meleagrian to Fajal, who replied with discreet modesty, only in his last sentence bidding me seek him in the adjacent byre as soon as it was feasible. Mr Davies standing by was certainly impressed with the fluency of our conversation, but after an admiring "Well! Well!" as a tribute to my linguistic attainments, he turned away in order to visit his head labourer, John Lewis, who was cutting bracken on the distant lea against the sky-line. I accompanied my host so far as the farm gate, but declined to walk with him to the upland, whither I watched him proceed alone. With the master and man busy over the fern stacking, with the mistress and maids employed within the dairy or kitchen, the way was clear before me. I turned my eyes with mixed feelings towards the indicated byre, which stood next to a row of newly thatched ricks of oats and barley, the spoils of the

lately garnered harvest. In that humble structure I knew there tarried now for me the messenger of Fate, the arbiter of my destiny. It was as useless, as it would have been cowardly, to evade or postpone the inevitable interview, so without further ado I carefully shut the yard gate and slowly picked my steps through the stones and mire to the open doorway of the shippen.

X

The cow-house at Pen Maelgwyn was a lengthy rather dilapidated building, and in its atmosphere of semi-darkness and bovine stuffiness I groped my way along the narrow passage between the crazy old mud wall and the wooden railing which secured the beasts. At the farther end was a square pen wherein the calves were kept, and it was here that at length I chanced on Fajal who was busily occupied in feeding his charges. On noticing me approach, he made an end of his task, and letting down the slip rail advanced to accost me in the gangway. Here he sank on his knees upon the slimy cobbles, at the same time catching hold of my coat with uplifted hands. This unexpected attitude of worship and devotion at once struck me unpleasantly; I deemed it insincere and inappropriate; and I repelled my suppliant in no gracious manner, striving to disengage myself from his grasp.

"I had a better esteem of you, Fajal," I began in tones of reproachful chagrin, "than that you should still attempt to mock me by persisting in this threadbare pretence of a subject and his king. You know who I am, and what I am in the eyes of the body to which you belong; so why indulge in this sickly acting when there is no stage and no

necessity for hypocrisy? Speak to me as man to man. Tell me what you wish to say, but tell it in the spirit of plain truth and reality."

Nevertheless, crouching yet more abjectly into the mire, Fajal still clung obstinately to my knees and even endeavoured to kiss my feet as he started to speak in a hollow voice that suggested intense emotion kept with difficulty under control.

"Majesty! Your rebuke is neither harsh nor undeserved; and if it so pleased you, I should willingly and joyfully feel the weight of your foot upon my neck, or even on my face. Cheerfully would I in my own person make the atonement justly due to you for the treacherous ingratitude that has been your Majesty's sole reward for your reign of virtue and self-sacrifice in Meleager. But there is no mockery in my attitude of subjection to the King of Meleager who has thus successfully defied and vanquished his fate, and now for a second time receives the entreaty to come and reign amongst us. And this time the loyalty I am authorised to proffer will not be confined to the uneducated populace, but it will also emanate freely from our hierarchy who have delegated me, seeing that I was in the past your most open admirer and warmest upholder, to implore your pardon and to beg you to acquire incalculable merit by returning and resuming that unselfish and beneficent sway for which at this moment all Meleager is sighing and praying. Do not suffer me to plead in vain, O King!"

Fajal paused, and then as I stood motionless and showed no disposition to interrupt he continued to entreat yet more vehemently, using at times the old arguments I had heard years ago from d'Aragno, and at times a novel system of reasoning based on the present affection and anxiety of the Meleagrians for my return.

"We are at the present time in a parlous state of unrest and transition in Meleager. Our people cry aloud for their vanished King, and threaten to overturn our ancient constitution, for some peculiar instinct seems to have penetrated the common mind —by what means or influence assuredly even I cannot divine—that you have deserted our planet in wrath and dudgeon to seek again your Father's court. Already a revolution has taken place in the hierarchy itself, and Marzona's satellites have shared their leader's fate, the fate which you yourself inflicted on him, most noble, puissant and wonderful Being! All, all pray daily for your speedy return; whilst amongst such old councillors as have survived the late cataclysm and the newly elected members of our caste, there is but one ardent all-pervading desire—to see yourself installed again as our King, our King who has of his own motion mastered The Secret, who has flown back to Earth, who alone is fitted to rule in Meleager. . . .

"And if you will but accept again our crown under these changed conditions of tardy sincerity in our hierarchy and of burning loyalty of our people

in all its ranks, what results may you not achieve? The periods of your rejuvenation will continue unchecked; you will be living and ruling and bending life to your purpose for generations hence, nay, centuries after my poor bones and those of my colleagues have been converted to dust and ashes; for aught I know to the contrary you may even, if you so will, achieve immortality thanks to the unmatched potentialities of our marvellous fountain. The very salutation 'O King, live for ever!' that occurs again and again in your Book of the Christian cult will in your case cease to be the meaningless compliment of courtier and sycophant. You will rule and rule, always youthful, always dominant, the one thing stable in a community of perpetual change. There are certain limits perhaps which you may not exceed, but these you already recognise and will observe henceforward in the same spirit that you have so nobly and unselfishly exhibited in the past. And if the day should dawn—may it be untold æons hence from my own day of recall!—when you will have grown weary of well-doing, weary of your unending performance of duty even under the lightest of moral yokes, when you sigh for release and oblivion, and yearn to plunge into the dusky mazes of the Hereafter, are there not means accessible to gratify such a craving? There is but one mode of entering this world, and that involves travail and tears, but there are a hundred exits from the house of life, and many of these are

pleasant and free of dolour. Remember what one of your own Herthian poets has dangled before the eyes of those who are exhausted and sighing for their euthanasia :

> "'There are poppies by the river,
> There is hemlock in the dell.'

" Nevertheless, may the time be far removed when the ideal King of Meleager thinks fit to abdicate, preferring the unseen unsubstantial bliss of the Other Life to the ceaseless routine of sovereignty with its attendant pleasures and burdens. . . .

" Majesty, ponder all this in your present quiet retreat which as yet has been scarcely touched by the encroachments of the bloodshed and tumult that have been released to complete the utter downfall of your unhappy Earth. Have you not dimly apprehended the dire prospects that even now await your fellow-mortals on this devoted distracted planet ? Is she not in the pangs of a fresh period of travail, and seeing her thus threatened and knowing her past history, do you expect her to bring forth a regenerating angel ? I tell you, no. The horrors of carnage and greed and ambition have only begun; the stream of blood is trickling slowly, but it will continue to creep onward with increasing volume till scarcely a corner of the Earth will not be saturated with human gore. . . .

" But enough of this awful theme, for my personal argument there is unsound insomuch as you yourself

are concerned, for you at least will be spared the sight and taste of the evils that will assuredly follow. Your sojourn on Earth will be very brief; already the effects of your last immersion in our sacred pool are beginning to subside; so that before this fateful year draws to its bloody and hideous close, your spark of life will be extinguished. Do not therefore imagine that you will be permitted to achieve the allotted span of mankind on Earth; the hidden waters of the Meleagrian spring are both lethal and vitalising. Once the proper hour of renewal is passed, a species of decay, even of disintegration, will supervene, and you will sink into your miserable grave, a loathsome object, a mass of disease, impotence and decomposition.

"Reflect, O King, reflect, ere it prove too late! Make your choice between an inevitable, speedy and revolting demise here on Earth, and the prospect of a further reign in Meleager under such conditions as I have already indicated to you."

With this last earnest appeal Fajal watched me narrowly for some seconds, whilst I remained voiceless and irresolute. Seeing me thus still obdurate in my indecision, he sighed heavily and then sought in the folds of his vest, whence he drew forth a thin packet that he presented to me with these significant words: "If you doubt my warning and advice, look in this mirror steadily a while, and you will then understand."

I had scarcely transferred the package to the

breast of my coat before I noticed an entering figure darken the patch of sunlight formed by the open door at the other end of the byre. It was Mr Davies returned from his fern cutting and now bent on an inspection of his stock. He saw nothing unusual however in my seeking thus the society of his new servant, who was now diligently cleaning the racks overhead. I delayed for a few minutes' talk with the farmer before bidding him good-morning and walking back to the inn.

In the verandah I found Dr Wayne smoking a pipe and enjoying the rare sunshine of this fleeting St Luke's Summer. We smiled at one another as I passed within, but I did not pause to converse, for I was impatient to open my concealed parcel. So I went upstairs and seated myself on a chair in the full light shed from the open window. Having unwound some folds of cloth I extricated the mirror of which Fajal had spoken, and found it to be a moderate-sized rectangular piece of thick glass without any frame and offering no peculiarity of aspect. Taking it in both my hands and in full glare of the sunlit window, I set to gaze intently in the expectation of some development whose nature I already half divined. As I prepared for this careful inspection of myself, or rather my counterfeit, I recalled to mind a picture I had seen years ago in the Wiertz Museum in what was then the capital of the Belgian kingdom, representing a youthful courtesan of the Mid-Victorian era stripped bare

to the waist and contemplating herself in a cheval-glass. But in the painter's canvas the glass itself returned no true image of her comely complacent face and her swelling breasts, but in their stead a leering female skeleton, a revelation that seemed in no wise to shake the lady's composure. So in my own case I had a shrewd premonition I was destined to receive some shock of this nature out of the innocent-looking mirror lately presented to me. Of this shadowy encounter before me however I experienced no dread; very possibly the glass would reveal to me my own anatomy as a suitable *memento mori* to dissipate any lingering notions I might still entertain as to the undesirability of prolonging my life by a refusal to return to Meleager. But why, I asked myself, should I be afraid to survey my own basic framework? Are we not all mere skeletons clothed in an exiguous garment of skin and tissue, and animated by some mysterious internal engine which keeps intact the fleshy envelope and supplies the motive power of mind and muscle?

The perfectly smooth complexion that confronted my inquiring look suggested nothing save the early stages of manhood, though there was perceptible in the eyes a weary nervous expression, that hinted at a youth marred or tempered by experience and disillusion. Many minutes must have been occupied in contemplation of this beautiful and yet spurious specimen of juvenile physiognomy before I began to note a very slight alteration in the skin and out-

lines of the face before me; tiny delicate pencillings like the ghosts of hoar-frost tracery were forming below the lids and at the corners of the temples; the rotundity of the cheeks seemed to shrink; queer vindictive lines started here and there on the countenance, spoiling its fixed impression of repose and announcing anxiety and discontent. I grew overwhelmingly interested in this whimsical exhibition of scientific magic (if I may so describe it); of alarm or disgust I felt no scintilla as yet, so absorbed was I in my attitude of inquisitive observation. Having once declared itself visibly, this metamorphosis of the face seemed to develop more rapidly; the skin was bereft of its freshness and became sallow and somewhat transparent; I could tell the staring bones within, and the contours of the skull were clearly defined. The hair had lost its sheen, and the throat its firmness and fulness. But it no more horrified me to detect my own skeleton peeping forth through the imprisoning flesh than it would have startled me to see my naked body on stripping to bathe. Whatever might be my final decision, whether to remain on Earth and perish, or to proceed to Meleager and live, Fajal's device could exercise no sort of influence over my well-ordered mind. It was uncanny, unwholesome, unnatural; but as a practical argument for its acknowledged purpose it must prove utterly unavailing, and was in truth almost childish in its conception.

I was still absorbed in watching this phenomenon

of the disunion of body and bones with complete unconcern, when my nimble imagination suddenly darted into a diverse channel of speculation. From my present medical or scientific abstraction I found myself sharply recalling Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes in the Campo Santo of Pisa, wherein are depicted for the edification of the careless Christian the three stages of human decay after death. It was a morbid but persistent theme, and not only did I fail to exclude it from my unwilling brain, but other paintings and representations equally or even more gruesome, such as the decadent artists of the days of the later Medicean princes loved to depict, arose to my prolific fancy. I recalled Zumbo's horrible wax figures, exhibiting at once the loathsome corruption of the flesh and the exquisite torments of hell-fire, wherewith a certain Tuscan Grand Duchess was wont to stimulate to self-denying piety a mind engrossed by the pomps of rank and riches. With these unwelcome but spontaneous memories there now supervened a physical sensation that was most repugnant. The room itself, despite the fresh sea breeze and the cheerful sunshine, grew close and oppressive; there arose an intolerable smell of putrefaction, the unmistakable bouquet of the charnel-house; and this insidious encroaching odour filled my whole being with a sense of disgust that I found impossible to expel.

Meanwhile in the mirror itself the process of disintegration was advancing apace. At first I sought

to ignore the changing tints of the rotting flesh and the entry of the worms and other vermin of the abandoned dead, and haply I might have succeeded in my mental struggle, had it not been for the increasing and well-nigh overpowering stench of the tomb which seemed to gather and enfold me in its dank miasmatic embrace. The pure light of the sunlit room had yielded to a dingy crepuscule, in which alone was plainly visible that accursed rectangle of glass with its surface churning out horror upon horror not only for the retina but also for the nostrils. And in the midst of this dissolving creeping mutating picture of human corruption there still shone out intact the feverish unfaded eyes that were stretched wide with a blank despair. I searched and searched with questioning dilated pupils their awful counterparts in the cruel glass, as though I were striving to force them to surrender up their appalling secret. At length I seemed to obtain the solution I sought yet dreaded to receive: it was Finality. What I saw being enacted before me by proxy was my own fate, my utter blotting out from the page of life, and not a mere stage, painful and ugly doubtless, but nevertheless only an intermediate stage to another phase of existence, as I had hitherto devoutly held. At last I realised that my own appointed portion was but this mean trilogy: the grave, corruption and nothingness; for the Hereafter owned no longer any concern with myself, the amphibian of two worlds, who had evaded

his manifest duties alike on Earth and in Meleager. I remembered with a shudder Fajal's solemn warning as to the dire effects of that youth-bestowing and yet death-dealing fountain wherein I had so often been immersed. Was it really so? Had I in my flight from my kingdom lost that priceless yet elusive endowment, the soul? A faint gleam of hope in the midst of my terror shot suddenly into the mirk of my anguish, when I recalled Anzoni's farewell greeting to myself and his expressed desire for a mutual meeting in the halls of the Hereafter. Ah, but then Anzoni had assumed I was going to meet my fate like a hero, and had no intention of slinking back to Earth!

Thus, despite this vague consoling thought, this clutching at a fescue in the whirlpool of my despair, I became obsessed with a fierce longing and determination at all costs to cheat death and to cling to every chance that is vital and physical. Fajal's mission had triumphed. I grew frenzied at the fearful prospect adumbrated for me on this glassy screen; I was frantic to quit the Earth, and equally frantic to stake anything and everything on a second translation to Meleager. I tried to dash the mirror from my hands, only to discover that, like Medea's poisoned coronet, the accursed thing clung to the flesh of my palms and fingers, and refused to be shaken off. In my madness of terror I screamed aloud, and with the glass still adhering like burning wax to my skin I dashed myself against the wall

repeatedly till I shattered to atoms the devilish instrument of torture in my ravings.

I can call to mind nothing further until I returned to sufficient consciousness again to see Dr Wayne's anxious and expectant face bent over me, as I lay prone on the boards surrounded by a mass of glittering fragments and splinters. My hands were cut and bleeding, but already the kind Doctor was tending them with some soothing antiseptic, and the pain was endurable. I allowed myself to be enticed to bed, where I passed the remainder of the day recovering from the double shock of mind and body I had so lately sustained. As usual, Dr Wayne spoke very little, and though his honest face betrayed his keen curiosity over my latest adventure, he asked no questions, and indeed scarcely ventured any comment, except the remark that there was a most peculiar scent of violets in the room, which was odd, seeing it was mid-October.

Violets!

XI

It required two or three days of repose and nursing before I could recover from my recent shock and the injuries to my hands. When at last I was sufficiently restored to leave the house for a walk, I felt small inclination to proceed to Pen Maelgwyn, and after hesitating as to my direction I eventually turned my steps towards a small beach that nestled below the northern promontory of the bay. In this sheltered fissure of the coast I used sometimes to sit on the shaly rocks covered with soft tussocks of faded sea-pinks, or else used to linger by the tide idly seeking amongst the wet shining pebbles for stray moss-agates or the tiny cowries like roseate pearls that a westerly gale invariably cast on these shores. Accordingly I followed a path towards this cove and descended the cart track that finally lost itself in the dry sand and globular boulders of the upper portion of this little haven. On advancing thus far I perceived to my surprise and annoyance that I should not obtain solitary possession of my accustomed haunt, for close to the water's edge stood a horse and cart; whilst I could detect the grating sound of shovelling sea-gravel by some person who for the moment was hidden by the cart itself. I strolled down the long narrow space to

discover with a start of astonishment that the individual occupied in digging the gravel was none other than Fajal. He seemed in no wise disconcerted at my apparition, but merely continued to ply his task till I almost touched him, when he immediately dropped his spade and sank on his knees amidst the dripping stones and weeds. He then proceeded to kiss my hands, my knees, and even my feet, but of this behaviour I took no heed.

"I have examined my face in your mirror, Fajal——" I began.

"Your Majesty has no need to tell this to your servant," replied he, with a sad, weary smile on his face, which expressed neither pleasure nor interest in my statement.

"—And I am now wholly convinced of the necessity for my immediate return to Meleager," continued I, rather nettled by Fajal's nonchalance.

"A few minutes' study of self in its surface is of more avail than a month spent in book-lore or close meditation," retorted Fajal dryly. "It is our last resource, our irresistible argument, although to the best of my knowledge there has never arisen any occasion to resort to it hitherto. Yet you perceive we are fore-armed in Meleager against every emergency, even for the case of a recalcitrant monarch who will not return to the people he has deserted."

"I should never have deserted Meleager," I

cried with some heat, "had not your caste set before me the choice of death or flight."

"Your Majesty then holds that any deviation from the course of fixed duty can be legitimately excused?" replied Fajal, arching his eyebrows. "But this is neither the hour nor place to raise a thorny question of political ethics which I look forward some day to discussing at our leisure. I have only to regret that in the course of my mission I have been compelled to perturb your Majesty so greatly in mind and body before I could impress on you the inevitability of your return to Meleager. It grieves and shames me to reflect that the arguments and entreaties of myself and my colleagues here and in London should have proved so futile and barren of success."

Fajal then gently took my hands in his, removed their wrappings of lint, and from a box of salve carefully anointed the still sore and angry flesh. (They were completely cured by the following morning.) He then began to speak to me of many matters concerning my return to Meleager and my subsequent duties there which I do not deem it desirable to inscribe in this place, and he ended by enumerating the arrangements already made for my second translation to my expectant subjects.

"This very night," said he, "I shall be dismissed with ignominy from Pen Maelgwyn. John Lewis, the old labourer, is already jealous and hostile, and there will shortly arise a quarrel between us, wherein

I shall unsheathe this knife. A hubbub will then ensue; Mrs Davies will uphold her servant, and Mr Davies, who seems less unworthy than the majority of his type, will reluctantly consent to my immediate dismissal. I shall be given my wages; I shall collect my humble store of clothing; and at early dawn to-morrow I shall quit Pen Maelgwyn. This day week, which will be the twenty-seventh day of the month, you will prepare for my secret return. Wait until midnight in your room, and then listen for the unmistakable call for your presence without delay at the farthest point of the headland yonder. All will be in readiness for your easy departure from the inn; even the lurcher in the stable-yard will be silenced that night. Have no qualms or fears; your Majesty will only have to traverse the two furlongs of ground between the inn and the rocky cape, whereat our craft will rest till we have embarked.

"One other matter however I wish your Majesty to understand. Is it not the case that you dispatched a manuscript to Earth some three years ago?" (I nodded assent.) "That scroll was duly delivered on Earth, was found, read, discussed and printed, with the only possible result that could arise therefrom. The person who gave your narrative to the world was one Edward Cayley, a learned recluse, and he was naturally only accounted a credulous fool for his pains. The book was certainly published, and though the absurd venture scarcely

deserved their serious attention, our envoys here have contrived to destroy nearly all copies of the volume. Perhaps also Cayley himself might have succumbed later to some of our peculiar methods of removal, had he not suddenly expired of the heart disease from which he had long suffered. The whole matter of your communication from Meleager has however been entrusted unconditionally to myself, and as I apprehend no danger whatsoever from anything you may publish, it is open to you to act freely in this connection. Here is Mr Cayley's book—keep it for any purpose you may require. I assure your Majesty I fear no ill result will accrue either from the late Mr Cayley's romance or from the manuscript which you yourself" (here I gave a start of genuine astonishment) "have been inditing almost daily in your chamber at Glanymôr. I cannot conceive either the contemporary pleasure or the ultimate object of your Majesty's constant occupation with the pen; it may be the old literary bacillus of Earth that is not yet eradicated from your semi-divine system; it may be some fanciful desire to benefit the planet of your birth by showing its leaders that human happiness is not necessarily involved in human progress, which is the fundamental error of these modern Herthians; it may be that a sheer sense of humorous amusement prompts you to this action. But whatsoever your goal, it is clear that you intend to charge your excellent friend Dr Wayne with the editing of your manuscript."

(Again I gave an involuntary start.) "Be it so. I have not the wish or the intention to thwart your Majesty in this innocuous pastime; nor shall I seek to disappoint Dr Wayne in his hungry expectation of the unveiling of the complicated enigma whose nature he dimly realises. Indeed, I am anxious to do a service to that interesting man, for whose hospitality to our errant King on Earth I am grateful, and whose rare spiritual qualities I admire and respect. Let him publish what you have written here in Glanymôr; what benefit can happen to you or what injury to us from proclaiming such a farrago of the impossible and the improbable? Very few will read the book, and none will give credence to its contents. Yours is not so much a mad world, as it has been arraigned by your leading poet, as an unbelieving world, which rejects with fury of derision all evidence of whatsoever is not obvious to its recognised scholars and astronomers."

I acquiesced in silence. It was astounding to me to learn that so much was known of my most private concerns, and I saw little use in arguing or asking questions. It was evident too that Fajal regarded my return to Meleager as a settled matter past all debate, and this mental admission induced in me a welcome sense of peace and deliverance.

Thus we stood on this misty solemn October afternoon beside the grey placid sea, surely the most extraordinary pair of mortals—if as mortals we could be faithfully so described—on the surface of

the globe. No sound save the regular silvery tinkle of the tiny waves lapping on the beach and an occasional movement from the stolid cart-horse beside us broke the spell of oppressive stillness, so that when finally Fajal spoke, his voice seemed to proceed from some far-off unseen place, which had no connection with our present environment.

"Has your Majesty no other aim than to escape the terrors of the grave in thus deciding once more to exchange your Mother Earth for Meleager? Do the loyalty and the prayers of your subjects weigh as nothing in the scales of your predilection? Has your abandoned palace no remembered charms? Our temple bells, our sunlit city, our shining harbour, our dawns and our sunsets, do these count for naught? O King, have none of the fibres of your once generous heart struck root in our soil? Have you already forgotten your splendour, your kingdom, your people, your friends in these few weeks spent upon your blood-soaked insurgent Earth?"

With a look of sorrowful reproach accompanying these words of rebuke, Fajal bade me examine a small tablet of crystal or of some transparent substance that he held in the hollow of his left hand. I gladly lowered my ashamed and burning face in its direction, but could perceive no more than a mass of variegated colours that seemed to be perpetually shifting and changing. I strained my eyes for long, vainly seeking to identify any of the minute objects thus depicted, till at last I ceased from the

attempt in despair of success. With a sigh of resignation, Fajal now presented me with a pair of large horn-rimmed spectacles, which I adjusted to my eyes, with the immediate result that the scenes in the crystal seemed enlarged and clarified. I saw distinctly my palace at Tamarida with the warm sunbeams flickering on marble pillars and dancing in golden bars on the frescoed vaulting; I saw the gardens, cool and umbrageous, with their many fountains spurting their foamy jets upon the drenched fronds of fern and palm; I saw my aery balcony with its table of audience and faithful Hiridia standing disconsolate beside my favourite chair; under the external awnings of blue and yellow I saw the deep purple line of the harbour beyond the enclosing balustrade. A veritable wave of nostalgia seemed to engulph me, as I watched thus every familiar scene of my Meleagrian existence pass in procession before my gaze.

As a lost soul might gaze on Paradise I beheld the pillared court of the great temple displayed before me, with its sunlit space filled with the usual throng of worshippers upon a holy day. There was the medley of colours, like some huge bed of gorgeous tulips, the white of the hierarchy, the crimson of the nobles, the green of the merchants, and the many varied tints of the garments of the populace; what past memories of my reign did not such a vision evoke in me! I fretted to be gone, so as to regain that rich and varied crowd beneath that

glowing sky, to reassume my accustomed place of honour and adoration in their midst. And then, even as I yearned, chafing at the ties which still bound me to Earth, my companion was able to inflame yet further my longing to return. With his disengaged right hand he searched the pocket of his coat and a moment later I beheld in his fingers a strange-looking instrument bearing some resemblance to the mystical sistrum of ancient Egypt. Bidding me continue to fix my eyes on the crystal before me, Fajal waved aloft this curved and stringed spherule, whereupon a soft murmuring seemed to fill the languid heavy autumnal air, and this muttering again developed into advancing waves of harmony that concentrated in an ultimate crashing note of triumph in my very face. The sounds now appeared to shrink and retreat, now to advance and expand in volume, but after some moments of vague, desultory, erratic come-and-go the music at length seemed to collect and pour as through some invisible funnel into the actual crystal lying in Fajal's palm. The ambient air was now completely free of its reverberations, and the music subsided into moderate compass, convenable with the scale and setting of the variegated scene that still lay exposed on the crystal tablet. Finally, the compressed sound blended with the multitude of figures in this miniature reproduction of the temple of Tamarida, so that I could distinguish the articulation of the many worshippers as well as the

canticles of the choristers wafted from afar to my ears. So might the Olympian Zeus in heroic days have heard the daily orisons of his earth-born suppliants, and have sought for the sparse note of sincerity amidst that vast uproar of human prayer ascending from a thousand altars to his ivory throne set amidst the unattainable clouds of highest heaven. But here from Meleager the issuing petition rang out unanimous, solemn and unfeigned. . . .

I had heard and seen sufficient; there was no more room nor any need for further colloquy with Fajal. I have but a dim impression of my hands being saluted, and of my striding rapidly with downcast head from the beach, leaving my fate behind me in the person of the humble Indian labourer with the horse and cart. In the waning light of the October evening I hastened back to the inn, and threw myself on my bed to digest my latest experience, the ultimate phase of my unique mission. In an hour's time I had shaken off the bewilderment of my encounter by the beach, and was able to converse naturally with Dr Wayne. It was now merely a matter of waiting seven days for the call, and there was nothing to prevent my passing this brief span of time pleasantly and profitably. I hope I have done what lay in my power to conciliate Dr Wayne, with whom I enjoyed some interesting walks in the mild drizzling weather along the summits of the rocky coast. Once or twice the

notion arose in me of taking the good man into my complete confidence, but eventually I decided against this course, and confined my efforts to preparing him for the task of publication of my second manuscript and of Mr Cayley's book which I shall leave behind me when I am called to quit this Earth. I have an overwhelming desire to see this purpose fulfilled, and as Fajal has given me express permission to do so, why should not I indulge this innocent whim of mine, however useless and trivial it may be deemed ? I think it was Dean Swift who once declared that the man who contrived to make two blades of grass grow where but one had bloomed before bestowed more solid advantage on the human race than all the combined clique of the politicians. So, if I can attract one convert into seeing through my own experienced eyes that what is called progress is not the sole thing needful and desirable for this sorely tried old world of my birth, I shall have accomplished my most modest aim. I shall have sown a seed of arresting reflection amidst the rampant tares of self-sufficiency and materialism which now clog the Herthian soil.

It is my last night, my last hour on Earth. Midnight has struck some time ago, and already the air is resonant with that strange haunting musical susurration that Fajal's spherule has made familiar to me. My few preparations are all completed, and I have but to descend quietly, loosen the bolt

of a certain door, cross the haggard, and follow the path to the headland where the royal vessel awaits the King of Meleager who now bids farewell for ever and for ever to the World and all that therein is.

EPIGRAPH

By Charles Wayne, M.D.

The reader who has persisted so far in the present volume will doubtless recall the fact that the first portion is heralded by a short foreword from one Edward Cayley, who therein expresses his full belief in the narrative he publishes. In this preface also he makes allusion to the traveller Sir W—— Y——, the original finder and owner of the manuscript. For the sake of convenience and explanation therefore I shall state here that the Editor of Part I. is the late Mr Edward Cayley, F.S.A., an official employed in the British Museum, whose book was issued in the early months of 1913. How this obscure work came into my possession I shall explain in due course, but I should like to add here that the book in question evoked no public interest whatsoever, and that such scanty notices of it as appeared were invariably unfavourable or contemptuous. Such a fate seems natural enough to me, for I have long observed how in all publications concerning the occult, nine out of ten readers are to be found scoffers and unbelievers, whilst the tenth is overcredulous.

But a few weeks after the appearance of the

volume, its editor himself was far beyond the range of hostile jest or criticism, for one March evening he was found dead of heart disease in the railway carriage wherein he was returning to his home at Harrow. Of "the exquisitely prepared roll of vellum covered with close crabbed writing," as also of its containing cylinder of some exotic white metal, I have been assured by Mr Cayley's executor that of neither can a trace be found—"suddenly, as rare things will, they vanished," though I am inclined to think that these gentlemen in common with a good many others of Mr Cayley's friends have never credited their existence save in the brain of their late owner. Indeed, I am told not a few persons openly denounced the ill-fated volume as an indiscreet *jeu d'esprit* of which Cayley himself was both author and editor. As to Sir W—— Y—— I see no reason to withhold the full name of Sir Wardour Yockney, head of an ancient Kentish house which received its baronetcy so long ago as the reign of Charles the Martyr. Sir Wardour was a fine shot, an ardent mountaineer and no mean scholar—alas! that I must use the aorist here in so speaking of him, for Sir Wardour, who started for Flanders with a motor car soon after the outbreak of the War, was described as "missing" so long ago as last October, nor have any further tidings reached his household concerning his fate.

These two principal witnesses therefore being no longer available, there remains none to whom I can

apply for information, none with whom it would prove worth my while to communicate. It lies therefore with myself alone to deal as I may think fit with the manuscript, which is practically a continuation or sequel of the extraordinary story already accepted and published as solid truth by Mr Cayley. This second manuscript was found by me under circumstances I shall presently relate in the bedroom of a sea-side inn in South Wales. With the narrative was also a letter addressed to me wherein the writer thanked me in warm and sincere language for the small amount of assistance and sympathy it had been my privilege to vouchsafe to him during our past twelve weeks of companionship on Earth, but the contents of the letter shed no further light on the subject-matter of the manuscript. In addition to these there was a copy of Mr Cayley's book, which is already become so scarce as to be almost unattainable. The contents of this little volume I have therefore placed at the beginning of the present publication, so that the reader can follow in due sequence all the amazing adventures of the writer from the date of his first departure from the Earth to the stars until the very moment when he voluntarily chose a second time to quit this planet in order to resume a state of sovereignty whose tragical interruption he has already described with his own pen.

I have always reckoned myself with perfect

contentment as a private person of no importance; *de me igitur nefas omninò loqui.* Nevertheless, I have been propelled willy-nilly into obtruding some portion of my personal affairs before the public and in what I conceive to be the public's true interest. For I myself have been requisitioned, so to speak, for the solution of some gigantic problem which is of deep import to our race, and my realisation of this unsought attention on my part must serve as my excuse for the short biographical details that follow.

I was born in the year 1853, one of a respectable family of dalesmen in Cumberland, and after a boyhood wherein the passionate love of solitary wandering over the wild north country fells seems the only trait I think worth recording, I was sent to study medicine at Edinburgh. Here I had a successful if not a distinguished career, and after taking the required degrees I departed to the East to practise my profession and to amass the conventional fortune. In the former object I trust I have performed my duty satisfactorily; and as to the second, I have at any rate acquired a sufficient pension for the needs of my evening of life. I have also found alleviation and no small degree of pleasure in my chosen science, especially in the study of certain tropical diseases, though my natural inclination for privacy has hitherto prevented my publishing some interesting notes and observations covering many years' research in this particular section of medicine. In my domestic

life however I have been less fortunate, for having married an estimable woman with every prospect of a joint happy existence before us, we were both deeply wounded in the deaths at rapid intervals of our four children, a series of blows that I myself, thanks to my profession and other interests in life, was able to bear with tolerable courage. Not so my poor partner; from the date of her last boy's loss at Singapore she could support this prolonged visitation of malign fortune no longer, and after a short but terrible attack of violent dementia she relapsed into a permanent condition of apathetic melancholy, from which she either could not or would not be diverted. I hope and trust I did all that was possible by patience and calmness to soften her hard lot; but, needless to say, it was a cheerless home wherein I moved, until after many years my suffering wife was at last called to rejoin her lost children.

From the date of her death I devoted myself with increased ardour to my duties, whilst I occupied my many spare hours in studying with care and intelligence such literature as deals with the cult of the supernatural, which has always possessed a singular fascination for my mind, and has, I feel sure, helped me to sustain with equanimity hitherto so many slings and arrows of outrageous fortune on this Earth. The years rolled by, so that in due course I became eligible for my retiring pension, yet even then I was in no haste to turn my back on

the East, where I had passed practically the whole of my life since adolescence, for during thirty-seven years of service I had only twice returned home on short leave. And now, when in professional decency and according to the custom of my caste I was expected to resign, I felt small inclination to revisit my native land, where the only contemporary relative I owned was a married sister living at Aberdeen. Of my various nephews and nieces I knew nothing, and I felt a not unnatural dread of being exploited or patronised by a coterie of self-satisfied young persons of the present generation. At times I thought of migrating to some sparsely peopled British colony, such as Western Australia or Tasmania, where the advent of an elderly widower might possibly be welcome, if only as tending to swell the meagre tale of the approaching census. I was still hesitating and pondering, when in July 1914 the tedious question was solved for me rather arbitrarily in the following manner.

A friend of mine about to revisit England had already engaged and paid for his passage from Rangoon, and was eagerly looking forward to his intended holiday, when almost at the last moment the poor fellow met with a shocking accident, whereby he was so unfortunate as to break both his legs. Visiting the patient at his house in the capacity of friend and not as physician, I found Mr —— in a pitiable state of lamentation over the money spent on his passage home, which he regarded

as practically lost; indeed, this particular matter seemed to oppress the invalid even more heavily than his other far more serious disaster. I reflected a while on the situation, and then deeming it a special opportunity for me to break from my thraldom of indecision and simultaneously to perform a real kindness to a brother in distress, I offered to relieve my sick friend of his ticket and to have his cabin transferred to myself. As a result of this suggestion I had at least the satisfaction of the injured man's warm gratitude, though I confess the homing instinct within me had grown so faint that I could summon up little or no enthusiasm at this new prospect of a speedy return to the land of my birth. One external ray of consolation however I was able to draw from this new arrangement, which was that the *Orissa* of the Pheon Line, the boat selected by my friend, was timed to sail on the seventeenth day of the seventh month of the year. I have long held a secret veneration for the figure seven, and in this case the circumstance of the benign figures was combined with certain stellar conjunctions in the heavens on which I need not dwell here.

Be that as it may, this tardy decision to sail on the *Orissa* at least put an end to my trials of irresolution, of which I could not help feeling heartily ashamed; and as the very brief intervening time was fully employed in packing my effects and in making other preparations for departure, I was

spared the usual cycle of farewell visits of ceremony which I greatly dreaded. On the day appointed therefore I found myself settled on the *Orissa*, a comfortable boat, and we proceeded on our homeward voyage, which proved wholly uneventful until we reached the Suez Canal. Here for the first time we received ominous reports of a colossal upheaval amongst the Great Powers of Europe, whilst our natural alarm was increased tenfold on learning at Port Said of the impending declaration of war between England and the German Empire. I shall not linger over the seething excitement on board our ship as we hurried at full speed through the Mediterranean in hourly fear of being sighted by the *Goeben* or some other German cruiser. It was therefore with an immense sense of relief that we found ourselves under lee of the guns of Gibraltar before we emerged thence into the waters of the Atlantic. We were about a day's sail from the Straits, with the weather still very hot and enervating, although we were north of the tropics, when at my usual hour for retiring I sought my cabin. I am generally a light but restful sleeper, and have rarely experienced even in its most transient form the curse of insomnia; but on this particular night, which was the seventh of August, I found myself a prey to a perfect demon of unrest. It was not the effect of the heat, to which I am thoroughly accustomed; nor was it the strain and stress of the late intelligence of war, for my exten-

sive reading in the domain of the supernatural has long divested my mind of all sublunary foreboding; no, it was, I am convinced, the close approach of some event of the first magnitude in which I was marked out to play a considerable part. (But perhaps I am describing my predominant sensations by the light of subsequent happenings; still I can at least faithfully aver I was conscious of some imminent crisis that demanded my fullest energies.)

For several hours I lay thus in my berth, my brain active and alert and prepared to detect the smallest sound or motion that was suspicious amid the ordinary routine of ship life during the night watches. But no such occasion arose, nor was there any conceivable excuse for my nervous tension and distressing wakefulness, which grew so unbearable that the first luminous flush of early dawn forced me to leave my bed. With a deep sigh of relief I vaulted to the floor, donned my overcoat and slippers, seized my pipe and tobacco pouch, and thus lightly equipped sought the open air.

Day was breaking with more than the usual riot of variegated colour over a calm, glassy sea when I reached the boat deck, which I set to pace hurriedly in order to quieten the throbbings of my unrested brain. Scarcely had I thrice tramped the planks before I heard a sharp shrill call from the bridge, and casting my eyes in the direction of the sound, I observed the officer on watch staring intently at something high in the air on the port side of the

vessel. Leaning over the taffrail I quickly espied an object in the sky at no great distance from the *Orissa*—an object which I can best compare in shape to a huge carp and of a silvery hue in the encroaching sunlight. Even as I gazed intently, I perceived the thing fall swiftly in a wavering course till it touched the sea, its actual collapse synchronising with the blast of the officer's whistle and the tinkle of two bells, for it was just five o'clock in the morning. All was now bustle, though without confusion; the steamer's reversed engines echoed with resounding thuds; the boat deck was peopled by bare-footed seamen who were disengaging one of the boats from its davits; there were calls for this person and that, including the ship's doctor, who I knew to be heavily sleeping off the potations of the previous night. All the hands required were quickly on the spot with the sole exception of the dissipated surgeon, whom a steward had hurried below to awaken. But the captain was too impatient to brook the least delay, and suddenly turning to myself, begged me to enter the waiting boat instead of the laggard absentee, a proposal I willingly accepted. Our boat was now lowered to the water; our swift strokes brought us closer and closer to the scene of the late mishap; we duly reached the spot. Not a sign of any wreckage, not a ripple on the surface, only the figure of a solitary survivor swimming or floating in the tepid crystalline sea.

We steered straight towards the supposed aeronaut and soon pulled him aboard without difficulty. He was certainly a remarkable man; slender but of immense height and clothed in a strange outlandish attire such as I had never seen before; yet he appeared to be of English or possibly of Scandinavian nationality from the extreme whiteness of his skin and the flaxen yellow of his hair, which was of a prodigious length. His eyes were tightly closed and the face was pallid, but I quickly reassured myself on testing the action of the heart and pulse that our derelict was practically uninjured by his recent fall. During our passage back to the *Orissa*, I placed the rescued man in as comfortable a pose as I could contrive, keeping his head with its dripping golden mane on my knees. I tried to pour brandy down his throat, but failed to open the clenched white teeth that resisted stoutly, and I saw no special reason to persist in my endeavour. Once during our transit my patient for an instant opened a pair of great sapphire-blue eyes and smiled faintly up to my face; and the strangeness of that fleeting glance increased the compassion and curiosity and interest which had already, naturally enough, been awakened in me.

Conveyed to my cabin, the strange man had to be stripped of his soaked garments consisting of a tunic and under-vest of fine texture; a small bag depending by a chain from his neck he fiercely defended, but otherwise was tractable enough, and

seemed grateful for our attentions though he never uttered a word. With no small difficulty I managed to dismiss inquisitive stewards and fellow-passengers and ministered myself to the needs of my unexpected guest, who finally fell into a deep refreshing sleep.

Towards evening he awoke, smiled on me graciously, and then extended his right hand towards me with a gesture that was at once half-wistful, half-imperious; but when I grasped it according to wont, he seemed manifestly surprised. This puzzled me, but since that time I have grown to learn and understand many matters, great and small, which I failed to comprehend in these early days of our acquaintance. At first, I confess, I harboured some doubts as to the sanity of my mysterious stranger, but I soon perceived that though he spoke English in somewhat halting fashion and his brain worked with some degree of deliberation, yet of the acuteness of his reasoning powers there could be no question. In certain appeals of mine he deferred eventually to my arguments and acknowledged their justice, submitting amongst other things to have his thick chevelure clipped to a more conventional length, in order to avoid vulgar comment. After some reflection too he ultimately agreed with me as to the desirability of his adopting some name in consonance with the regulations for landing at Liverpool. Nevertheless, he utterly refused to declare his identity, but merely kept repeating with a smiling face, "Call me King!"

to which pseudonym of his choice I ventured to add the Christian name of Theodore, promptly recalling the case of the impoverished King of Corsica on whom "Fate bestowed a kingdom yet denied him bread," for (quite erroneously) I then deemed him fully as destitute as that historic royal pauper.

I do not think I need dwell on our subsequent adventures in London and in Wales, for they have all been amply and faithfully set forth in the narrative of "Theodore King" himself. In his manuscript he mentions my name on many occasions in kindly but perhaps not always in highly flattering terms. Not that I rebel, for I am now well aware how often my petty scruples and my lack of perception must have irritated the Superior Being whom I was thus privileged to assist during his brief sojourn on our Earth. Nor shall I attempt here to analyse the causes that operated to attach me so closely to the service of one who drew first my interest, then my devotion, and lastly my whole fund of loyalty. Imagine me then at an early stage of our strange alliance as placing myself wholly at the disposal of this stranger, whose semi-divine attributes I was quick to perceive and acknowledge; and merely venturing at certain times to proffer such humble aid in mundane details and trifles as would naturally fall beneath the notice of a King of Meleager, transported to Earth and torn with celestial anguish as to his future duties towards his relinquished realm. And in this blind mental

servitude I refuse to see anything dishonourable; on the contrary, my feeling is that of a man who has for a few moments been permitted of grace so to clutch at the fringe of the robe of the Superhuman; as a child of Earth who has succeeded in tracking the rainbow to its hidden source and bathed his hands in its fabled shower of golden dew.

Whither our strange alliance was tending or what would eventuate with regard to my companion, I purposely refrained from debating even with myself. I merely stood aside and awaited all developments with perfect calm. I never sought to pry into the nature of the visits of the outlandish wanderers who pursued our steps both in London and at our quiet Welsh retreat. Yet I was fully aware of the gradual unravelling of some wondrous skein of Fate, wherewith I had only an indirect and subsidiary interest. For "Theodore King" was usually silent, and it was only during his last days prior to his final disappearance that he ever exhibited the smallest desire to take me into his confidence, and even then his statements to me were vague, and rather hinted at services to be rendered by me in the future than at an elucidation of the past. At the same time I was not overtaken by surprise when the final event supervened, and I awoke one morning to find my Superior Being flown from this Earth whereon he felt so little inclination to linger.

In the manuscript the reader will observe the writer describes his feelings and movements till the

supreme moment of leaving his abode in order to sail back to Meleager. Up till that point therefore I shall not presume to interpose my own account, and there is little further to report after that climax to my unique adventure. It was my daily custom to enter "Theodore King's" bed-chamber at about eight o'clock, and on fulfilling my normal visit on the morning of 27th October I saw at once the bed had never been slept in, whilst a large package addressed to myself lay in a prominent place on the table. It contained the manuscript, the copy of Edward Cayley's book, a private letter to myself and the bag of gems. At the same time I found in another place an envelope containing a short but perfectly drafted will signed by Theodore King and witnessed by two persons at Pen Maelgwyn farm, bequeathing everything he possessed to "his excellent friend and physician, Charles Wayne, late of Rangoon." Nor had I later on the least difficulty in obtaining probate. Apparently there was nothing of value to leave, for I did not think it necessary to mention the existence of the Meleagrian jewels to any outsider, whilst I was touched and flattered by the kind thought. I have my own intentions with regard to applying the considerable sum of money represented by those splendid gems; and if God in His mercy be pleased to bring back our unhappy land into the old paths of peace and prosperity I hope to carry out my plan. But this lies altogether outside the pale of my present task.

Having mastered the contents of the letter and the concluding portion of the manuscript I duly aroused the household, affecting an anxiety I did not feel, for of course I thoroughly understood what had occurred. An excited crowd, we searched hither and thither for traces of the missing stranger, and it was not long before Deio, the old ostler, had made a discovery which did not in the least astonish me. This was the finding of some clothing held down with heavy stones at the edge of the promontory only a quarter of a mile from the inn. Here the demented man, long recognised as an eccentric by the neighbourhood, must obviously have committed the act of self-destruction by throwing himself over the cliff into the cold grey surge below. Although it was wet and stormy, boatmen attempted to find further evidences of the suicide at the base of the crags, but needless to add their search was fruitless. There followed the usual tale of police inquiries ending in nothing; of long columns in the local journals, and of short paragraphs in the bigger organs of the Press, concerning the mysterious affair at Glanymôr; but all this excitement died down with a rapidity that might only have been expected in that period of tense anxiety which marked the furious campaign on the Belgian frontier towards the close of October. Interest in the strange occurrence soon flickered out before such engrossing themes of comment and speculation, even in so remote a spot as Glanymôr. Certainly a farm-hand

at Pen Maelgwyn affirmed he had heard the buzzing noise of an aeroplane that very night above the Glanymôr cliffs, despite its being too dark for him to distinguish any object; and though everybody belittled or disbelieved this statement, its author stoutly maintained to the last that he was positive he had not been mistaken in his surmise.

I know John Lewis, the cow-man, was right; and I also know it was the call of the craft wherein my late companion, the King of Meleager, went up into a world of light and left me alone and sorrowing here.

THE RIVERSIDE PRESS LIMITED, EDINBURGH